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LAO on wrong track with criticism of high-speed rail

By approving Proposition 1A in 2008, California voters committed \$9 billion of their tax dollars to construct a super-fast bullet train system linking San Francisco and Los Angeles in less than three hours. They approved it because they are fed up with high gas prices, horrible traffic and overcrowded airports.

Due to this strong commitment, California has already been able to leverage an extra \$4 billion in federal high-speed rail money. We expect more to come. The vision shown by voters brought us these much-needed federal dollars at a time when California's economy is in the worst condition since the Great Depression.

That money will also fund construction of an important section of the high-speed rail track in the Central Valley and produce over 100,000 jobs.

Unfortunately, a report from the California Legislative Analyst's Office released last week threatens to destroy the high-speed rail project and all the jobs that go with it.

The LAO seems to have bought into a bogus argument - generated by passenger rail opponents such as the libertarian Reason Foundation - that building the first segment in the Central Valley will create a "train to nowhere." So the LAO wants HSR funds diverted to commuter rail upgrades in Orange County and the Bay Area.

To set the record straight, HSR will never operate trains that begin and end in Madera and Bakersfield. These two points simply represent the initial construction of HSR track. If the LAO had done its homework, it would understand that the trains will be able to slow down and continue past Madera to the Bay Area and Sacramento on existing track as an interim phase. In fact, the High Speed Rail Authority is already planning for such a scenario.



Daniel Krause is executive director of Californians for High Speed Rail.

So the phrase "train to nowhere" doesn't wash.

The Central Valley is an excellent place to start because the flat, open terrain will allow high-speed trains to go at full speed and keep construction costs low. Therefore, starting in the Central Valley provides the most bang for the buck.

In fact, high-speed rail will reduce travel times between Bakersfield and Madera from three hours to 45 minutes. However, if the LAO has its way, limited HSR funds will be applied to expensive commuter rail upgrades in urban areas that produce minimal time savings.

Moreover, there's nothing unusual about starting transportation projects in the middle. The interstate system began in rural Missouri, and Interstate 5 began in the Central Valley. But the LAO, which is supposed to give legislative advice, is assuming the role of amateur engineer, claiming it knows best where to start construction.

By pushing to redirect the federal funds to commuter rail and delay the project schedule, the LAO risks losing the \$4 billion, demonstrating a shocking recklessness with the California economy.

When Washington offers that kind of money, take it. Don't repeat the mistakes of Florida, Ohio and Michigan, which tried the same thing and lost their federal high-speed rail grants completely.

It's time to bring California into the modern era with high-speed rail.