

Maglev developers forging ahead regardless of rival project

By **Richard N. Velotta (contact)**
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If developers of a magnetic levitation transportation system linking Las Vegas with Anaheim, Calif., are worried about some of the political issues that could hamper their proposed \$12 billion project, they didn't show it Monday night.

Representatives of the American Magline Group, which wants to build the California-Nevada Interstate Maglev Project, said they would forge ahead with their plans even if a rival group breaks ground on a traditional steel-wheels-on-rails project by March, as the rivals have said they would.

Builders of the competing project, the \$4 billion DesertXpress high-speed train, have launched a worldwide search for vendors and suppliers and already have completed an environmental impact statement. They say they'll soon begin work on the project between Las Vegas and Victorville, Calif.

But Neil Cummings, president of the American Magline Group – a coalition of companies partnering to build the maglev for the nonprofit California-Nevada Super Speed Train Commission – said he thinks the public would be more supportive of his project.

"We'll continue on no matter what," Cummings said in response to a question of whether the maglev plan would die if DesertXpress gets off the ground.

"One way to answer that question is, is the DesertXpress really competition for the maglev system and, really, is it a competition?" Cummings said. "Because if somebody has a choice between 300 mile-an-hour travel between Anaheim and Las Vegas or an hour and 40 minute (trip) between Las Vegas and Victorville and then get a taxi or hitch a ride or whatever you do, I'm pretty sure we'd win a competition. In theory, even if DesertXpress gets built, I'd have no problem building our train alongside it and put them out of business."

Cummings made his comments in the second of three transportation forums sponsored by the Transportation Research Center at UNLV and the Ward 5 Chamber of Commerce, which represents businesses in the vicinity of the expected terminus of both the maglev and the DesertXpress.

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Tom Stone, president of DesertXpress, gave his project's presentation on Aug. 31 and a third forum featuring other lower-profile high-speed transportation systems is scheduled for Oct. 19.

Cummings was one of several speakers on the maglev project with representatives from other American Magline Group partners – Transrapid International USA, Hirschfeld Industries, General Atomics and Parsons – sharing the spotlight.

In recent days, political controversies have swirled around the maglev proposal with the issuance of a press release by the office of Gov. Jim Gibbons announcing the pending arrival of \$45 million in federal funds to complete engineering and environmental studies for the first chunk of the maglev project, a 40-mile link between Las Vegas and Primm.

But Federal Railroad Administration officials denied that the money was forthcoming anytime soon.

Cummings explained that his group isn't actually awaiting a check; that's not the procedure. Instead, he said the Nevada Department of Transportation is awaiting a contract for the scope of work to be performed. Then, the American Magline Group can proceed and would be reimbursed for completed work. He added that the group already has posted \$11 million in matching funds as required by legislation authorizing the \$45 million.

Much of the American Magline Group presentation explained how the technology works. Maglevs are propelled by electromagnetic fields that pull the 50-ton vehicles across a guideway at speeds of up to 310 mph. While the vehicles and their guideway tracks look like a monorail, the vehicles never make contact with the track. Because there is no contact and no wheels, maglevs are quiet and don't require the costly maintenance cycles that traditional trains need.

Other details that came out of Monday's forum:

- Transrapid USA, a subsidiary of the German company that developed the maglev technology that is being used commercially on a line connecting downtown Shanghai with the city's airport, would license the technology to the American vendors and Cummings said the trains and guideways would be manufactured in Las Vegas, creating 13,000 jobs.
- Tom Bordeaux, senior transportation manager for Parsons, the engineering company partner, said the Transrapid system is designed to last 80 years with no major maintenance. Traditional trains need to have steel rails replaced about every seven years because of the pounding high-speed trains give them in their thousands of annual trips. Bordeaux also said Parsons would develop the Anaheim Regional Transportation Intermodal Center, the proposed terminus of the maglev line and a station where all of

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Southern California's transportation systems – light rail, commuter trains and buses – would converge.

- While some critics have said maglev is unproven, Walter Buss, president of Transrapid International USA, said the Shanghai system already has traveled 4.1 million miles, carrying 20 million passengers, and it has a 99.8 percent on-time operating efficiency.
- One-way tickets on the maglev between Las Vegas and Anaheim are proposed to cost \$55, comparable to today's airline fares and the pricetag estimated by DesertXpress for its service.
- Cummings said the maglev project has support in Southern California because the line would link Anaheim with Ontario International Airport, an underused facility east of Los Angeles. With Los Angeles International and Anaheim's John Wayne Airport at or near capacity, Ontario could be better utilized and passengers could access it on the maglev from Anaheim within minutes.
- Cummings said the proposed maglev route would not traverse the Mohave National Preserve, a National Park Service-administered area south of Las Vegas. The entire route, he said, would use Department of Transportation right-of-way or Bureau of Land Management property and eminent domain would not be pursued. One of the DesertXpress route proposals would cut through a small piece of the Mohave National Preserve.
- Cummings said the lack of progress on maglev that frustrated Sen. Harry Reid enough to make him switch allegiance earlier this year to the DesertXpress was the result of a lack of high-speed rail policy leadership within the federal government. He added that he is proud of the progress the maglev plan has made in the last year after President Obama emphatically stated that high-speed rail is a priority for his administration.

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