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High-speed rail project may fall off track

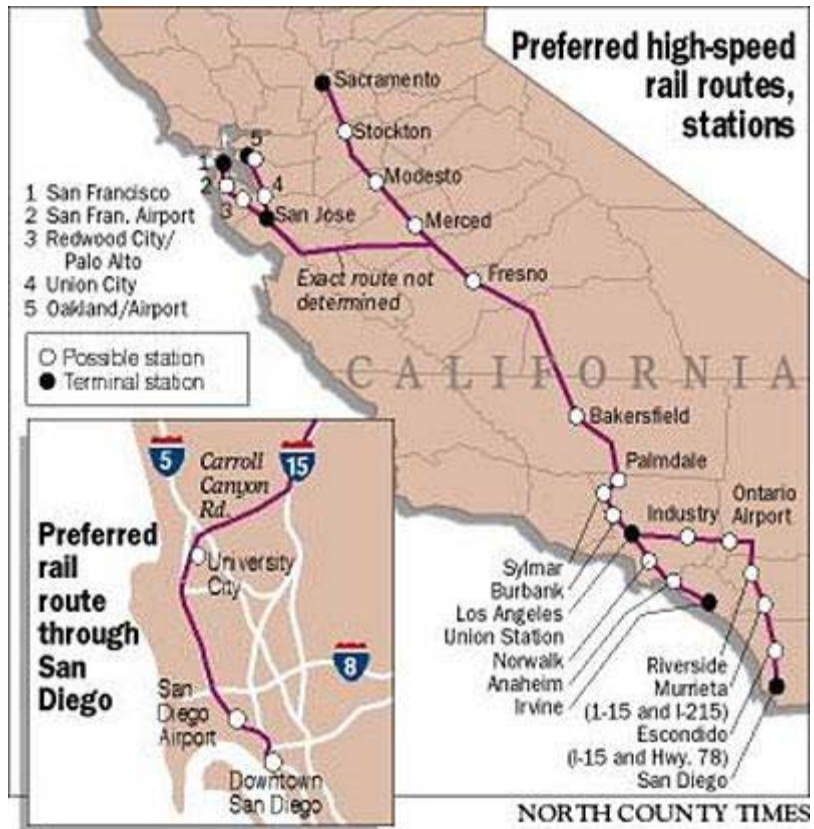
By: DAVE DOWNEY – Staff Writer

While the governor's proposed massive infrastructure bond could jump-start the stalled expansion of California's beleaguered highway system, it could derail the high-speed train project that has had trouble getting out of the station since it was proposed a decade ago.

Dan Leavitt, deputy director for the California High-Speed Rail Authority in Sacramento, said in an interview Monday that the \$37 billion project is in danger because Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger did not include money for it in his \$68 billion proposal, which could appear on the June ballot.

"If the governor's proposal were to move forward, that would be arguably the end of high-speed rail in California," said Leavitt, whose agency was created in 1996 to plan a network of fast passenger trains like those in Asia and Europe.

The project calls for laying down 700 miles of track, linking San Diego with Los Angeles, Fresno, Sacramento and San Francisco. The southernmost leg was to arc through western Riverside County, following Interstates 215 and 15 through Temecula and Escondido.



With trains capable of traveling more than 200 mph, agency officials say, passengers could travel from downtown Los Angeles to downtown San Diego in an hour and 13 minutes. Temecula commuters could make it to San Diego in half that time.

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Speedy passenger trains are used widely in Asia and Europe, and Mexico last month announced plans to build the Western Hemisphere's first such system between Mexico City and Guadalajara.

Schwarzenegger administration officials say it is not the governor's intention to kill high-speed rail; he just believes the time is not right to build a system in California.

"If the governor had wanted to kill high-speed rail altogether, he would have eliminated the authority," H.D. Palmer, spokesman for Schwarzenegger's Department of Finance, said Tuesday. "The governor chose not to do that."

Escondido Mayor Lori Pfeiler, a project advocate, said Monday it seems the enormous project is a victim of bad timing.

"High-speed rail will take us into the next generation," Pfeiler said. "But it is hard to talk about the next generation when we haven't kept up with the needs of this generation."

Still, Leavitt contends timing is critical for high-speed rail. He said land must be set aside for it now, because the state's rapid development is quickly closing opportunities to lay down track, particularly in booming Riverside and San Diego counties.

"Frankly, if you are not able to preserve the right of way pretty soon, the ability to build something like this is really thrown into question," he said.

Regional officials say it is not surprising high-speed rail is in a predicament.

Temecula Councilman Ron Roberts, past president of the Southern California Association of Governments, a six-county planning agency, said Monday political support for the project has been waning.

"I'm disappointed," Roberts said. "But you can only kick a dead horse so many times, and we've been kicking that dead horse for 10 years now."

There was much enthusiasm for the project early on, and lawmakers prepared a \$10 billion bond measure for the November 2004 ballot that was to spur construction of the Los Angeles-to-San Francisco leg. But Sacramento placed the bond on the shelf when the state plunged into its worst-ever fiscal crisis and planned to bring it back this November.

Now, the measure may be scrapped altogether.

"You cannot do what the governor is proposing to do under his strategic growth plan and do a \$10 billion high-speed rail bond," Palmer said, "and still stay below the 6 percent threshold of debt on general obligation bonds." That is the long-term-debt ceiling the administration is proposing in a bid to win support from Republicans skeptical of borrowing.

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As a result, rail supporters are left placing their fading hopes in an alternate public-works bond proposal by Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland, who suggested allocating \$1 billion for the train system. Authority officials are hoping that the money, or a similar sum, survives, and that it will be enough to keep the project chugging down the track.

Pfeiler said high-speed rail is worth fighting for because most of the region's growth is occurring inland and a railroad already exists on the coast. High-speed rail along the I-15 corridor would not only give long-distance commuters more choices for traveling to work, but would boost the economies of inland cities as well, she said.

Roberts, however, said all will not be lost if the project falls off track.

"We've waited so long that it may be time to ask a question," Roberts said. "Do we really want to put all of our money into high-speed rail? Or do we want to go to the next level and start discussing maglev, which is what I believe is going to be the high-speed transportation preference for the future."

Maglev is an abbreviation for magnetic levitation, a technology that uses huge electric magnets to propel trains on a cushion of air. California's proposal is for steel-wheeled trains on steel tracks. Maglev trains can travel even faster, reaching speeds of 300 mph.

"The nice thing about maglev is that it's above ground," Roberts said. "You can build it above other things."

Consequently, setting aside land in advance isn't as critical, he said.

Roberts said another option would be to scrap high-speed rail in favor of cheaper commuter trains. The Riverside County Transportation Commission already has endorsed extending Metrolink's commuter rail system south from Riverside to Temecula.

However, Joe Kellejian, a Solana Beach councilman and transportation chairman for the San Diego Association of Governments, San Diego County's regional planning agency, suggests it is too early to write high-speed rail's obituary.

"There's still a lot of talking to be done between the two sides of the aisle on this issue," Kellejian said Monday.

While it's probably a foregone conclusion the bond won't contain money for construction, there is a reasonable chance it will have enough dollars to shift the project into the design stage.

After years of study, the rail authority in November adopted an environmental impact report that specifies where the system would be built in much of the state. Leavitt said the agency is preparing to follow that up with a report that locks in a preferred route

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from the Central Valley to San Francisco.

After that, the money runs out.

"We've already spent a lot of money getting the environmental document and holding neighborhood meetings," Kellejian said. "It would be a shame to now lose all of that hard work."

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