

High-speed railroad to L.A. crawls ahead Schwarzenegger wants to put off ballot measure

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Imagine stepping out of a downtown San Francisco office building, strolling down the street to the Transbay Terminal and climbing aboard a sleek modern train. Settle into a high-backed seat, read a book, nap or gaze out the window as the train zips down the Peninsula, shoots through the Central Valley and surges into the Los Angeles Basin.

Two and a half hours later, walk off the train into bustling Los Angeles Union Station.

Sound like a dream? At this point, it is. But advocates of a 700-mile high-speed rail system say it's a vision within the Golden State's reach. And, they say, California needs to build the system to handle the state's growing population and travel needs.

A key environmental study released last week supports that conclusion, saying it would be far cheaper, less polluting and faster than building more highways and airports. But the idea of a California high-speed rail system has been discussed and debated for a decade. And with the state budget crisis and political controversy waiting down the tracks, the high-speed rail movement could slow to a stop.

Backers say it's time to get moving.

"It's not a question of if we will have high-speed rail," said Joseph Petrillo, a San Francisco attorney who is head of the California High Speed Rail Authority. "It's a question of when."

The authority, a state commission charged with planning a potential fast train system, proposes building a railroad that links the Bay Area and Sacramento to Los Angeles and San Diego via the San Joaquin Valley with trains traveling up to 220 mph. By 2020, the authority says, 68 million passengers a year would ride the high-speed trains. They would pay one-way fares between the Bay Area and Los Angeles of about \$50.

"It's the kind of dream that Leland Stanford, Charles Crocker, Collis Huntington and Mark Hopkins had of building a (transcontinental) railroad across the Sierra," said Rod Diridon, a member of the California High Speed Rail Authority.

But standing in the way of the nation's first high-speed rail system are obstacles as formidable as the rugged mountain peaks and canyons of the Sierra Nevada.

Since 1999, the price tag for the system has swelled to between \$33 billion and \$37 billion

from an original estimate of \$25 billion, state budget woes have caused the governor to urge removal of a high-speed rail bond measure from the November ballot, and controversies have erupted on both ends of the state over which route the fast trains should traverse.

As with any transportation project, finding the money to pay for high-speed rail will be the biggest challenge.

The bond measure, which state lawmakers voted last year to put on the ballot, would raise money to link downtown San Francisco with downtown Los Angeles by high-speed rail -- the first phase of the system -- with another \$9 billion coming from matching federal funds that project backers hope to win.

An opinion poll conducted last summer by the Public Policy Institute of California found that 65 percent of voters would vote for the measure, but Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed removing it from the ballot indefinitely, saying the state can't afford to finance more bonds.

"Notwithstanding the potential merit of providing high-speed rail as part of the transportation system, and given the state's financial situation," said Schwarzenegger spokesman H.D. Palmer, "we think it's premature to put a bond measure of that magnitude on the ballot at this time."

Some high-speed rail supporters think it would be wise to wait until 2006. That, they say, would allow the state's economy to recover and would give the rail authority more time to hold public meetings, complete the environmental review process and better publicize the plan.

But others want to stick to a November vote, saying California can't afford to delay starting construction on the Bay Area-to-Los Angeles stretch of the project, estimated to take about 10 years.

"We need to be under construction by 2006 or 2007," said Diridon. "Otherwise, we'll lose \$1.5 billion a year (in cost increases) with delays."

The rail authority won't sell the bonds until it needs the money -- beginning when construction starts, Diridon said, "so there is no reason we shouldn't keep the bond measure on in November."

Even if the measure captures the simple majority needed to pass -- raising \$9 billion for high-speed rail construction and \$950 million for connecting transit systems -- construction couldn't begin without matching federal money. And while there are bills in Congress that could provide high-speed rail funding, federal money for a California high-speed train is no sure thing.

To get the high-speed rail built, Californians will have to pony up, most likely by approving a bond measure. But taxpayers won't have to shoulder all the costs, said Mehdi Morshed, executive director of the High-Speed Rail Authority. High-speed rail systems turn a profit in Europe and Japan, he said, and the San Francisco-to-Los Angeles first phase of the California system can be expected to earn a surplus of about \$300 million a year, he said. That money would be used to expand the system, adding stretches to San Diego,

Sacramento and up the east side of the bay to Oakland.

Private investors could also be tapped, Morshed said, perhaps by allowing them to build and operate the system and share in the profits, or by selling off the rights to operate the trains.

"We will try to do as much as we can to protect the public's interest and get private contributions to share the risk," Morshed said.

An implementation study, expected in June, will outline options and recommend how the authority should proceed to get high-speed rail moving.

Political battles over alignments and station locations also threaten to slow the advance of high-speed rail.

Already, the authority finds itself under fire in both Northern and Southern California for its mountain crossings out of the Central Valley to the Bay Area and Los Angeles.

The rail authority proposes to enter the Bay Area from the south using either the Pacheco Pass or an approach under or through the Diablo Range south of San Jose. Critics, who include the Train Riders Association of California and the Sierra Club, favor the Altamont Pass and want it considered as a potential entry to the Bay Area. They say it's a cheaper alignment that would lure far more riders. But the authority says it already studied the Altamont and ruled it out because it would make the system less efficient and difficult to operate.

In Southern California, cities in the Antelope Valley are pushing for the rail line to leave Bakersfield then loop through their desert communities into Los Angeles instead of taking a more direct route under and over the Grapevine along Interstate 5.

And Morshed anticipates skirmishes over which cities get stations and where they're located. He worries that protracted political battles could delay the construction or cause the creation of a less-than-ideal system with inefficient routes and too many stops.

"The only thing that can get in the way is the human factor and political pressure," he said at a recent forum in San Jose, where Altamont alignment supporters asked pointed questions.

Alan Miller, executive director of the 1,500-member Train Riders Association of California, an advocacy group, supports high-speed rail but not the exclusion of the Altamont alignment into the Bay Area, which would include a new rail crossing of the bay near the Dumbarton Bridge.

"We want it built," he said, "but we want it built right the first time. On a project this expensive you can't go back and do it over."

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