

Lawmakers ready to green-light California high-speed rail

Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee, 3-23-12

Its popularity has declined sharply, many of its details have yet to emerge, and independent authorities have questioned its financial and operational viability, but California's bullet train project is very likely to get the green light from the Legislature soon.

That's the consensus of those who have been counting votes among the Legislature's dominant Democrats, who can give the California High-Speed Rail Authority authorization to sell bonds and begin construction of an initial segment in the San Joaquin Valley.

And that's true even though lawmakers still don't know, in any detail, what linking the northern and southern halves of the state via rail would entail.

They don't know how much the system would cost, who, if anyone, would put up its money, or whether it could draw enough passengers to cover costs without subsidies.

Gov. Jerry Brown assumed political control of the CHSRA last year when the project appeared doomed and appointed a trusted adviser, Dan Richard, to make it work. He and other bullet train overseers unveiled, with great ceremony, a revised plan they said was workable.

However, the new price tag, around \$100 billion, was several times more than what voters said it would cost when they approved a \$9.95 billion bond issue, and was catnip for the project's opponents, an eclectic lot that includes San Joaquin Valley farmers, residents of the tony San Francisco Peninsula and Republican conservatives.

The sticker shock sent Richard back to the drawing board, and he's now generating a new plan that reverses the last plan's stretched-out construction schedule in favor of quicker construction. It also will attempt to grease the political wheels by offering money to Southern California and the San Francisco Bay Area for commuter rail upgrades that would accompany the San Joaquin Valley segment.

While it awaits the new revisions, a "peer review group" of transportation experts, appointed by legislators to give independent advice on the project, issued its seventh report this week, reiterating qualms about financing, ridership and other issues that "can and should be addressed before the state borrows money or the authority commences construction."

It finds the "lack of committed financing" to be especially troublesome and implies that it would be foolhardy to spend billions on the San Joaquin segment without a viable financing plan for the entire system.

The Legislature often ignores good advice from its own experts – the bollixed-up budget being one consequence – and makes decisions for expedient political reasons. This may be another sorry example.

Just because a bullet train sounds neat-keen or China has one are not sufficient reasons to saddle this already insolvent state with another burden it can't afford.