

High-speed rail panel promises changes

Michael Cabanatuan, San Francisco Chronicle, 3-15-12

When the California High-Speed Rail Authority finishes tweaking its business plan in a few weeks, expect the cost to drop, the construction time to be shortened and improvements along the Peninsula and in Southern California to be added.

Speaking before a state Senate committee and hundreds of observers in Mountain View on Tuesday night, Dan Richard, chairman of the rail authority board, offered a preview of the changes likely to be made when the final version of the business plan, released in November, is completed late this month. But he and fellow board member Jim Hartnett provided few specifics of the version that will be considered by the board at its April 5 meeting, even when questioned by senators.

The authority's draft business plan raised eyebrows when it said that it could cost at least \$98.5 billion - nearly triple original estimates - to build the Bay Area-Los Angeles line, take 20 years to complete, and had secured only \$13 billion in funding, with no firm plan for finding the rest.

Since releasing that plan, part of an effort by Gov. Jerry Brown to get the controversial rail plan back on track, legislators, overseers and residents have weighed in, suggesting or demanding changes. The top concerns, Richard said, included speeding construction of the project, cutting the cost, delivering rail improvements sooner to the metropolitan "bookends" of the project, and making sure the 130-mile stretch of tracks scheduled for construction in the Central Valley don't become a useless \$6 billion investment.

Asked by Sen. Joe Simitian if the jaw-dropping cost estimate would be reduced, Richard said it would: "I believe that number's coming down."

The key to the revisions, Richard and Hartnett explained, lies in the so-called blended approach that relies on incorporating Caltrain and Southern California's Metrolink regional commuter line into the system. The authority signed an agreement with Southern California agencies last month, and Bay Area officials are preparing a plan that would electrify Caltrain and outfit it with advanced train control systems that would not only beef up commuter rail service, but also allow high-speed rail to share the tracks.

"We are being responsive to the notion that there must be investments in the bookends of the system," said Richard.

The authority's plans call for construction to start late this year or early in 2013 with a 130-mile stretch of rail from Chowchilla (Madera County) to Bakersfield. It would be completed by 2016. The federal government has given California about \$3.5 billion to start work, but the state Legislature would have to match that money with \$2.3 billion from the high-speed rail bond measure voters approved in 2008.

Critics, including the state's independent legislative analyst and a peer-review committee, have questioned the decision to start in the valley. Opponents have labeled that stretch "the train to nowhere." Will Kempton, former Caltrans director and head of the peer review panel, called it a financially risky approach, because there's no assurance of future funding to connect it to the Bay Area or Los Angeles.

"We viewed it as having a great risk for becoming a stranded investment, not being connected to anything," he said.

Given the risk in the Central Valley and the immediate benefits in the metropolitan regions, Sen. Lou Correa, D-Santa Ana, asked why the authority doesn't just start building in Los Angeles or San Francisco. But federal officials have said they want their money for that first stretch of track to be spent in the Central Valley.

Starting in the valley makes sense, Richard said, because high-speed rail is a statewide project backed with state bonds. Improvements in the Bay Area or Los Angeles would benefit only residents of those areas, while the Central Valley stretch, where trains would travel longest at top speeds of 220 mph, would serve as the backbone of the fast railroad.

"To mitigate our risk," he said, "we should do both: Build that spine, and invest in the bookends."