

52 percent want bullet train stopped, poll finds

California voters are showing signs of buyer's remorse over the \$68-billion bullet train project, poll finds.

Ralph Vartabedian, Los Angeles Times, 9-28-13

A majority of voters want the California bullet train project stopped and consider it a waste of money, even as state political leaders have struggled to bolster public support and make key compromises to satisfy critics, a USC Dornsife/Los Angeles Times poll found.

Statewide, 52% of the respondents said the \$68-billion project to link Los Angeles and San Francisco by trains traveling up to 220 mph should be halted. Just 43% said it should go forward.

The poll also shows that cracks in voter support are extending to some traditional allies, such as Los Angeles-area Democrats, who have embraced the concept of high-speed rail as a solution to the state's transportation problems. The survey results suggest that the current plan and its implementation are of specific concern to those voters, according to officials with the Republican and Democratic firms that jointly [conducted the poll](#).

"I don't think they are against the concept, but they are against the way it is being executed," said Drew Lieberman of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, a Democratic polling firm in Washington.

The massive project has fallen a year behind schedule and is facing lawsuits that threaten to stall the momentum of the project and a groundbreaking now likely to come early next year.

The new findings mirror a USC Dornsife/L.A. Times poll taken last year, just before the state Legislature approved funding to start construction, under political pressure from the Obama administration and the state's Congressional leaders. At that time, state rail officials argued that public backing would increase as improvements to the rail plan became clear.

But a wave of new support hasn't materialized. Instead, signs of buyer's remorse among voters for approving a 2008 ballot measure to fund the current project have increased. The poll found 70% of respondents want the project to be placed back on the ballot — up from the 55% measured in last year's USC Dornsife/L.A. Times poll.

As public opposition solidifies and the start of construction nears, the question of whether the state should go forward with one of the biggest and most technically difficult infrastructure projects in California history is taking on greater urgency.

"It should have public support to go forward," said former state Sen. Quentin Kopp, a former champion of the rail project who has become one of its most influential critics. "The lack of support reflects a general disbelief of the authority leadership, which has become a public relations game."

Kopp, who served for years on the California High-Speed Rail Authority board, said the agency will almost certainly need another bond measure to complete construction, making public opinion potentially crucial to the project's survival.

The results include some good news for the project. A 61% majority said the bullet train would help reduce traffic on highways and at airports, and 65% said it would create jobs. And by one measure, public opposition

appeared more pointed last year. At that time, 59% of poll respondents said they would vote against high-speed rail if it were on the ballot, though they were not asked whether the project should be stopped.

Rail agency officials declined to be interviewed. Spokeswoman Lisa Marie Alley said in a statement: "We will continue to uphold the will of the voters, Legislature and federal administration to help modernize California's transportation system and create tens of thousands of new jobs."

Fifty-one percent of respondents called the project a waste of money, and 63% said they would never or seldom use it. Given the choice, 58% of voters would rather fly or drive from Southern California to the Bay Area, and 39% would take a bullet train.

Voter concerns about the project have been heightened by the tough economic times that continue across the state, the poll shows.

"Over the last five years, voters have had to tighten their belts, and they feel the government should be doing the same thing," said David Kanevsky of American Viewpoint, the Republican firm that helped conduct the poll for the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences and The Times.

Poll respondent Lara Erman, a Burbank resident, cited those concerns as the basis of her opposition to the project. "Our state and our country are in a lot of trouble right now with the condition of the economy and the job market," she said. "It would be better served as a private enterprise project."

Bryan Koenig, an aircraft mechanic in Ridgecrest, said he objects to the project mainly because he won't use it and "the cost is exorbitant."

The bullet train network is supposed to begin carrying passengers between the Bay Area and Los Angeles by 2028. Construction was supposed to have begun late last year, but it now appears it will not begin until 2014, assuming a court ruling does not sidetrack it. A Sacramento County Superior Court judge ruled this summer that the state violated the legal protections imposed by the 2008 voter-approved bond measure that will provide \$9 billion in funding. A second ruling, due this fall, would determine how to remedy the violation.

The sampling of 1,500 registered voters conducted in mid-September found significant differences in voter opinion about the project across the state. In Southern California, 56% of respondents said they want the project stopped. Even in the Bay Area, where support has historically been strong with the backing of Rep. Nancy Pelosi, only 51% endorsed the project. The margin of error in the poll was 2.9 percentage points.

Nowhere is the project more controversial than in the Central Valley, where farmers, businessmen and homeowners have formed coalitions to overhaul or derail it. Even though Gov. Jerry Brown touts the benefits to the Central Valley, 59% of voters there want to call it off, according to the poll. Opposition is even stronger in the Northern California counties, where 61% say it should be killed.

"The best thing for Brown is to have one of the lawsuits stop the project until he leaves office," said Dan Schnur, director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at USC.

The poll also asked about a quixotic proposal by high-tech businessman Elon Musk, chief of Space Exploration Technologies and Tesla Motors, for a tube-type transport system, called the Hyperloop, that would move people between L.A. and the Bay Area in 30 minutes at a cost of \$20 per trip. Sixty-five percent of the respondents said the proposal was not realistic. Nonetheless, they liked the idea, and 55% said they would take the Hyperloop, compared with only 13% who would opt for the high-speed rail.