

Effort to halt bullet train and allow 'Hyperloop'-like options aims for Calif. ballot

Anne C. Mulkern, Environment & Energy Publishing, 1-17-14

Two drives are underway to stop California's high-speed rail line through a November ballot initiative, including one that wants to speed development of a futuristic transport system like the "Hyperloop" described by Tesla Motors founder Elon Musk.

Nicholas Garzilli wants voters to approve a measure that would bar the sale of more bonds to fund the Golden State's planned bullet train, which is estimated to cost \$68 billion to link Los Angeles to San Francisco.

Garzilli's proposition also would have the California Public Utilities Commission find the right of way or location where private companies could develop pilot projects that use "high-speed and/or high-efficient transportation technologies."

Garzilli is chief operating officer at Evacuated Tube Transport Technologies (ET3), a company that wants to advance a system of travel similar to Musk's Hyperloop concept. ET3 would use car-sized passenger capsules that move in frictionless tubes, and according to its website it could swoosh people or cargo from New York to Beijing in two hours.

"This is happening," Garzilli, a self-described transportation fan, said in an interview as he watched airplanes with his son at the Santa Monica, Calif., airport. "The question is, is California going to lead the way or get stuck with this old [rail] technology?"

Musk released a white paper last year describing a Hyperloop that would be made up of two long steel tubes. The vessel would be equipped with an electric compressor fan on its nose that would transfer high-pressure air from the front to the back.

An onboard battery pack would power the fan moving air around the capsule, while linear electric motors mounted inside the tube would propel the pod forward by creating an electromagnetic pulse. According to Musk's vision, it could jet people from Los Angeles to San Francisco in 30 minutes inside pods traveling up to 800 mph. The high-speed rail, on the other hand, would take nearly three hours.

Garzilli is waiting for the state's attorney general to approve the measure's language and issue an initiative title called "The Transportation Innovation Act." That would allow him to begin collecting the signatures needed to get a proposition on the ballot.

Poll gives edge to rail opponents

A September poll from the University of Southern California and the *Los Angeles Times* found that those who want to halt the bullet train project have a slight edge over those favoring the effort. The [opinion survey](#), which reached 1,500 registered voters in mid-September, found that 52 percent of those surveyed wanted to put the brakes on the development, 43 percent wanted it to continue and 5 percent were undecided. There was a 2.9-point margin of error.

Time is running out for those seeking to get propositions on the ballot. They'll need to collect enough signatures and get those counted and verified by June 26. For measures that don't involve taxes or fees like the ones on

high-speed rail, 504,760 signatures are needed. For those that impose a new or increased fee or tax or seek a constitutional amendment, it takes 807,615 signatures.

Each election cycle, there are many efforts to get initiatives on the ballot in California, which allow citizens to attempt to change state law. But it's an expensive proposition, said Stephen Nicholson, political science professor at the University of California, Merced.

"If you're a well-resourced, well-heeled political group, you can get anything you want on the ballot," Nicholson said. "It's basically an industry." There are several companies that specialize in gathering signatures outside grocery stores and other locations.

"That kind of means it all comes down to money," Nicholson said. "If there isn't sufficient money to do that, then it's quite difficult." He added that he couldn't recall a case in the last 20 years where a person or group used only volunteers and put a measure on the ballot.

Garzilli said he's spoken with companies that have said it would cost about \$3 million to gather signatures, and then, depending on how much opposition is involved, \$10 million to \$15 million for a campaign. He plans to meet with investors that want ET3 and tell them a ballot measure "makes it possible."

The proposition Garzilli wants wouldn't seek funding to develop the system, just the location for a test project. It could be ET3, Hyperloop or something similar, he said. "We don't want any money," he added. "We just want permission. We want to be able to compete."

The ballot measure would let construction continue on high-speed rail for any part where bonds already have been sold to finance development. So far, that includes the initial construction segment, which will span about 130 miles, from north of Bakersfield at the southern end to north of Fresno at the northern terminus. That could serve as a model that residents could compare with a Hyperloop or ET3, Garzilli said.

State assemblyman launches second measure

In addition, there's an effort to stop high-speed rail that comes from state Assemblyman Jeff Gorell (R), who also is running for the U.S. House. He's seeking the seat held by freshman Rep. Julia Brownley (D).

Gorell's proposition would bar the state from issuing any more bonds for the bullet train. It would direct California "to the extent feasible ... to cancel or terminate existing contracts entered into by the state that relate to the project."

Gorell also has submitted a potential proposition and is waiting for an initiative title. He calls his the "Stop the \$100 Billion Dollar High Speed Rail, and Reinvest in Education Act," because relieving the state from paying bond interest and debt service associated with high-speed rail would free up that money to go toward education.

The \$100 billion figure stems from an earlier cost estimate for the train that has since been revised. The state said it could save money by sharing existing rail in some locations. That would also extend somewhat the time of travel from Los Angeles to San Francisco.

"The sooner we shut this down, the less money that will be wasted when the inevitable occurs," said Gorell spokesman Douglas Lorenz. "Public opinion for the high-speed rail project, it's tanked" since voters approved the project via a 2009 ballot initiative. "It's not going to be what had been sold to them, and it's far more expensive than what anyone imagined."

Gorell has been interested in halting the bullet train project for more than a year, Lorenz said. There was extra motivation following Gov. Jerry Brown's (D) announcement last week that he wants to help fund high-speed rail with proceeds from the sale of permits under the state's carbon cap-and-trade program, Lorenz said.

Gorell plans to hand his proposed measure on high-speed rail off to someone else interested in stopping the project, Lorenz said. Between his Legislature job and run for Congress, Gorell wouldn't have time to dedicate to the cause, his spokesman said, but he wanted to get an initiative launched before the clock ran out.