

Bullet train path looking smoother

Dorothy Mills-Greg, Capitol Weekly, 10-24-14

California's \$67.5 billion bullet train has been described as "off-track" so long that some thought it was permanently derailed.

In fact, the outlook has brightened: A series of court decisions, a move by Gov. Brown to pump money into the effort and an awakening interest from high-dollar investors has given the huge project new momentum.

"High speed rail is about the future," said Jeff Morales, chief executive officer of the California High Speed Rail Authority. "It's about what California has done historically."

Some say that future isn't so rosy.

Sen. Andy Vidak, R-Hanford, unsuccessfully pushed for legislation to have voters reconsider spending money on the project. Vidak says the project would unfairly saddle Californians with excessive debt and disrupt the lives of Californians.

"High Speed Rail is going to go right through the heart of farmlands, businesses, homes that have been part of families for generations," said Vidak spokesperson Jann Taber.

The Authority already has begun construction along a 29-mile stretch along Highway 99 between Madera and Fresno. About 10 buildings have been demolished so far, a portion of Golden State Boulevard in Fresno is set for relocation and bridge construction across the Fresno River is expected to commence in the "coming months."

The Madera-Fresno segment is part of what's known as the Initial Operating Section, or IOS, which is 300 miles of track from Merced to Burbank in the L.A. basin by 2022. The IOS has an estimated \$6 billion price tag – at least \$3.3 billion in federal funds and \$2.6 billion in voter-approved bond money.

The \$67.5 billion cost covers some 520 miles of track from San Francisco through the Central Valley down to the L.A. area to be completed by 2029. It does not include the final pieces – a section from Sacramento southward and the stretch from L.A. to San Diego.

Planes are best for flying people across the country or ocean, Morales noted. "[It] doesn't make sense for short trips."

One out of six flights leaves California airports just to go someplace else in California, a "tremendous misuse" of airspace, Morales said. The Authority projects that 200 flights will not be made because passengers will instead be taking the "clean train." Using the latest technology, recycling, and planting trees will let the construction project be "net zero," meaning it will emit no greenhouse gases.

Vidak, up for reelection, said in a written statement that the bullet-train “will kill jobs, hopes and dreams. The people of California are demanding and deserve a re-vote on this out-of-control train wreck.”

Private investors from around the world, however, are taking a more positive view. At least nine – including Siemens, AECOM and Vinci Concessions – have expressed interest in the program, interest generated at least in part by the state’s decision to pump more money into the project.

In 2008, voters approved Proposition 1A, which authorized the sale of \$9 billion in state bonds to build the high speed rail and \$950 million to improve intercity and commuter rail lines where it connects to the HSR.

The Legislature allocated \$4.7 billion of those bond funds in 2012 for the project. The Legislature and governor also have approved \$250 million in revenue from the state’s auctions of greenhouse gas-emission credit. Next fiscal year, the bullet train will receive 25 percent of the total cap and trade funds.

Some critics, such as a Kings County group called Citizens for California High Speed Rail Accountability, say the current plan looks nothing like the proposition that voters approved.

Frank Oliveira, co-chairman of the group, contends that voters expected “a bright red Camaro” and instead got a “yellow Fiat 500.”

“You wouldn’t stand for that if you were a consumer,” Oliveira said. “This is the same thing only here we’re talking about billions of dollars.”

Under Proposition 1A, the project would be \$45 billion divided by between private, state, and federal funds, the entire project – including the Sacramento and San Diego links — is now estimated to cost up to \$100 billion, according to a state Senate committee analysis.

A suit by two citizens and Kern County against the Authority involved the Authority’s preliminary funding plan. In order to complete the track, the HSRA needs \$20 billion more to complete the IOS track, said the parties bringing the suit.

But the state Supreme Court refused to hear the case Oct. 15, letting the appellate court’s decision stand, in which the court ruled that the Authority can move forward with its current funding plan.

Critics also contend that the speeds and travel times projected by the bullet train planners aren’t realistic, partly due to variations in elevation along the proposed routes.

Meanwhile, the train’s proposed connection to San Francisco through the passes of Altamont, Pacheco, or Panoche has resulted in another lawsuit.

The suit, filed by the Town of Atherton and others, contends that the program's environmental impact report is inadequate, and that ridership and revenue estimates are "fatally" flawed.

The suit also says the project violates California Environmental Quality Act. But an appellate court ruled in favor of the Authority and said there was no substantial evidence that the HSR's environmental report was inadequate. Atherton and its allies have appealed to the state Supreme Court.

Challenges to such a huge project are not unexpected, Morales said. "Nothing big is easy," he said, noting that the BART system in San Francisco was just as controversial but ultimately proved to be popular. He also acknowledged the apparent slow pace of the project, but "it's not a 'Christmas morning' kind of thing where we wake up one morning and 200 miles [of track] are built."

Oliveira's group also has expressed concerns about "Valley Fever," a ground fungus in the south Central Valley that can cause infections when its spores are inhaled.

"Where are they going to get this dirt [for construction]," Oliveira asked. If they get it from the valley, they're going to truck dirt with spores "all over the valley," he said. "We're going to live by this stuff."

Meanwhile, other groups are focusing on the Authority's construction hiring practices.

At least 30 people who support the HSR came from Fresno to the Authority's Board meeting on Oct. 14 to show concern about outreach and hiring practices.

"It's been said that the community didn't care. We wanted to bring them here, not to beat anybody up but to say we do care," said Reverend Richard Daniels from the Fellowship Baptist Church in Fresno. "The system is broken and it needs fixing."

Marvin Dean is with the San Joaquin Valley Construction Academy, an organization created to assist minorities in obtaining work in public work projects. Dean is proposing to create a pilot program with the Authority that would diversify those getting jobs in connection to building the HSR. "We want to be included," Dean said. "We're not mad at anyone . . . just give us a fair shot."

The primary contractors doing construction have real concerns about hiring new people who haven't done the work before, Dean said, and the Authority is asking people who don't know the community to do employment outreach. This has led to a lack of diversity in the hiring process. "We're nowhere in the process," Dean said, meaning minority groups. "They're leaving out a valuable piece of it [the work force]."

HSRA Board Member Katherine Perez-Estolano thanked the group for coming and for the way they said, “Look, you need to do better.”

“We’re very committed to getting it right,” Perez-Estolano added, “and getting it right in Fresno.”

California, in 2012, was admitted as a member to the Union Internationale des Chemins de Fer, or the International Union of Railways, for its 80th General Assembly in Philadelphia. The UIC’s mission is to promote world-wide rail transportation and meet mobility and sustainable development challenges. It has 202 members from places like Europe, Russia, India, Japan, and Kazakhstan.

“The world’s railway community welcomes this decision to start the implementation of high speed rail in the US,” UIC Director-General Jean-Pierre Loubinoux said in a press release. “As it is continuously demonstrated, day after day, in countries which introduced high speed train operations, this type of transport will definitively contribute to the development of a safe, efficient, customer-friendly, sustainable mobility system serving customers as well as society as a whole.”

“We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to get this thing built,” Dean said.

So why should farmers get special rights on top of their outrageous government hand outs? High speed rail will enable more productive economic activity in places like Fresno that will be a big improvement over any farmland lost. The anti-HSR people are arguing against creating the best environment for economic growth in California.