

# **Debate about high-speed rail should be based on facts**

**Jim Costa, Janice Hahn and Zoe Lofgren, Sacramento Bee, 1-27-15**

Representatives Costa, Hahn and Lofgren are co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus on California High-Speed Rail.

Each of us is entitled to our own opinion, but as Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously said, we are not entitled to our own facts. Unfortunately, after reading the opinion pieces by Reps. Jeff Denham, Kevin McCarthy and Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association President Jon Coupal (“California should halt high-speed rail,” Jan. 8; and “High-speed rail goes off the track without funding plan,” Jan. 18), we felt compelled to set the record straight about California high-speed rail.

Denham, McCarthy and Coupal contend that estimated travel times from Los Angeles to San Francisco have doubled. The truth is that when the project is completed, one will be able to make the trip in 2 hours and 40 minutes.

They write of unrealistic ridership estimates and claim that “one analysis after another has raised these red flags” but do not point to credible evidence. McCarthy and his colleagues in Congress did call for a federal review of the ridership estimates by the independent Government Accountability Office. But far from raising any red flags, the GAO found that the California High-Speed Rail Authority is using industry-standard processes to analyze and estimate ridership, and made no recommendations for changes in how it is being calculated. Similarly, the independent legislative peer review group and leading academic experts from around the world have corroborated their work.

The authors claim the authority recently increased its cost estimate for construction in the Central Valley by \$1 billion. Instead, the bids for the first two contracts have come in significantly below estimates.

They say that opposition to the project is at an all-time high. But recent polls show support for the project is higher now than when California voters approved funding in 2008. And Fresno Mayor Ashley Swarengin – a supporter of high-speed rail – won 300,000 more votes in her unsuccessful campaign for state controller than the Republican gubernatorial candidate, who had made his opposition to high-speed rail a central campaign issue.

The authors write that Congress singled out the project and denied it funding. That’s not true. Congress failed to provide new funding for any new rail programs anywhere in the country.

Meanwhile, the authority continues to move ahead with a combination of federal and state funding, including cap-and-trade proceeds, which independent estimates place at between \$3 billion and \$11 billion through 2020. And, yes, private investment interest continues to grow as the program progresses and construction gets underway in the Central Valley. Nine companies, mostly large construction, engineering and infrastructure firms that have worked on high-speed rail elsewhere, have written letters expressing their interest in financing a portion of the project.

History has shown that nearly all major initiatives, including infrastructure investments, are controversial and difficult to get underway. These investments prove to be the underpinning of economic growth and quality of life. That’s why the groundbreaking event in Fresno wasn’t about politicians; it was a gathering of business leaders, students, environmentalists, workers, small-business owners, community leaders and others who understand that we need to continue to invest in our state’s future.

Challenges and criticism are important elements of ensuring oversight of any program. To that end, the debate about high-speed rail in California must be based on facts and merits. Unfortunately, for some, it appears the discussion has already deteriorated into baseless claims and partisan politics.