

California bullet train -- high cost, tiny impact

Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee, 3-28-15

A few years ago, when it was first proposed that state “cap-and-trade” fees on carbon emissions be used for the state’s bullet train project, the Legislature’s budget analyst questioned its legality.

Legislative Analyst Mac Taylor’s office noted that state law requires fees to be spent on projects and programs to help the state meet 2020 emission goals.

The bullet train would not be in operation by then, the analysis said, and construction activities would actually increase emissions.

Gov. Jerry Brown, who sees the bullet train as a legacy, pushed hard for the cap-and-trade funds because otherwise the project had no major financing sources for anything beyond a few miles of San Joaquin Valley track.

The Legislature ignored Taylor’s red flag, decreeing that the bullet train would automatically receive 25 percent of cap-and-trade funds. Implicitly, it accepted Brown’s assurances that the electrified bullet train would have a big effect on carbon emissions, particularly by reducing automotive travel.

The question arose again last week, when Jeff Morales, who runs the California High-Speed Rail Authority, appeared before a state Senate committee.

Once again, Morales assured senators that the bullet train would slash carbon emissions deeply to justify its big share of cap-and-trade funds, throwing out some impressive-sounding numbers.

Had the senators been sharper, or more interested, they might have learned that by the CHRA’s own data, the bullet train will have almost no impact on automotive travel, the single biggest source of carbon emissions.

This is from the CHRA’s own website:

“By 2040, the system will reduce vehicles miles of travel in the state by almost 10 million miles of travel every day.

“Over a 58-year period (from the start of operations in 2022 through 2080), the system will reduce auto travel on the state’s highways and roads by over 400 billion miles of travel.”

Those are the kind of mega-numbers that bullet train advocates like to throw around, but they are actually infinitesimal.

California motorists rack up about 330 billion miles of auto travel each year, or nearly a billion each day.

Therefore, the bullet train’s projected reduction in driving would be scarcely 1 percent.

Or to put it another way, the 400 billion vehicle-miles of claimed reduction over 58 years would be the equivalent of just over one year of driving.

This tiny reduction, moreover, assumes very high train ridership. And it would come at a very high cost.

The project's currently projected cost is \$68 billion, and with no more federal financing on the horizon, officials may seek a massive construction loan, perhaps from the federal government, and repay the debt with cap-and-trade revenue.

It would be a lot of money, at least \$100 billion with interest, to spend on an unnoticeably tiny dent in automotive travel.