

Gov. Jerry Brown's best hope for high-speed rail is a Donald Trump presidency

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Gov. Jerry Brown badly needs a financial angel to salvage his sputtering bullet train. Nobody ever dreamed it might be Donald Trump.

But Brown and Trump share at least one viewpoint: High-speed rail is needed for America's transportation future.

In March, Brown said of the Republican presidential candidate, who promises to build a wall to protect the U.S.-Mexico border: "If Trump were ever elected, we'd have to build a wall around California to defend ourselves from the rest of the country."

Think again, governor. He could be just the right guy for one of your legacy projects. As president, Trump conceivably could pry billions of dollars from Congress for the grossly underfunded and unpopular California bullet train.

Trump, as far as I know, has never specifically embraced the \$64-billion plan to build a 500-mile high-speed rail line from Los Angeles to San Francisco, currently the nation's largest public works project. But he has extolled high-speed rail.

"China and these other countries, they have super-speed trains," he told the Guardian last year. "We have nothing. This country has nothing. We are like the third world.

"But we will get it going and we will do it properly and, as I say, make America great again."

Trump basically repeated that in a March campaign speech: "[The Chinese] have trains that go 300 miles per hour. We have trains that go chug-chug-chug."

In his nomination acceptance speech last week at the GOP convention, the billionaire developer promised to build "the railways of tomorrow."

Of course, he also pledged to build highways, bridges, tunnels and airports. Additionally, he vowed, "we will completely rebuild our depleted military." Plus build the wall. And beef up law enforcement.

That's quite a spending spree for someone who simultaneously assures voters they'll get a large tax cut.

So pardon me for being skeptical about any Trump dollars for the choo-choo. But no one else is even talking about more bullet-train bucks.

Many of Brown's fellow Democrats have soured on the project — because there's not enough money in sight for completing it and because the line's initial route would be in the rural San Joaquin Valley.

As state Senate leader Kevin de León (D-Los Angeles) told me two years ago: "I don't think it makes sense to lay down track in the middle of nowhere... out there in the tumbleweeds."

Land's cheaper there, the state says. Anyway, folks there need construction jobs.

But many valley farmers strongly object to the rail line invading their croplands.

Ironically, some of the state's strongest support for Trump is in the valley. Wonder what these voters will think of their candidate's enthusiasm for high-speed rail.

A recent Field poll found that Trump was running 30 percentage points behind Democrat Hillary Clinton statewide among likely voters. But in the Central Valley he trailed by only two points, a statistical tie.

In March, a survey by the Public Policy Institute of California showed that Central Valley voters opposed the bullet train by 53% to 44%.

One of the most vocal opponents of the bullet train is California's highest ranking Republican, U.S. House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield, a Trump convention delegate. He has repeatedly tried to cut off what little federal funding there is for the rail project.

"McCarthy continues to strongly oppose the high-speed rail boondoggle," his spokesman, Matt Sparks, emailed me last week.

Clinton — endorsed by Brown before the California primary — also supports high-speed rail. But as president, she would have virtually no chance of persuading a Republican-controlled House to spend money on a blue state bullet train. Trump plausibly might.

Without more federal funds, the train seems headed for derailment. Maybe it is even with additional Washington largess. The project has received only \$3.5 billion from the feds, most of it so-called economic stimulus funds appropriated during the recession.

The bullet train is at least \$44 billion short of enough money for completion. There's no private financing. And state politicians don't dare ask California voters to dig deeper into their pockets. They approved \$9 billion in bond borrowing in 2008.

The legally suspect revenue stream Brown has been relying on — a "cap-and-trade" system designed to fight global warming — has stopped producing much money and is being tested in court. Essentially, it involves the state peddling pollution permits to emitters of greenhouse gasses.

In August, Brown will attempt to negotiate an indefinite extension of the cap-and-trade program, which is scheduled to end in 2020.

The nonpartisan Legislative Analyst Office raised concerns about the rail project in March and, in its typical understated way, said this about the initial operating segment: "Ending [it] in an unpopulated agricultural area does not appear to be an effective approach." The reference is to a farm field near the tiny town of Shafter.

The state has reversed course. At first, it was going to lay the rail line from the San Joaquin Valley into Burbank. Now it plans to go north into San Jose. That was the last straw for some Los Angeles County Democrats.

High-speed rail fans such as Trump and Brown bemoan China, France and other nations operating high-speed rail while we can't seem to. But California is not a nation. No state has ever built a bullet train. States can't print money.

Brown's best hope is probably a Trump presidency. It's safe to assume the governor thinks that's not worth it.