

Bullet trains won't get us anywhere

By James E. Moore

THE MAIN problem with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's 2007-08 budget proposal to cut funding for the California High-Speed Rail Authority is that it does not go far enough. Instead of eliminating 90% of the agency's funding, he should shut the thing down permanently.

The bond measure to pay for the first leg of the rail system, first set for the 2004 ballot but delayed twice by the Legislature, should be removed from the 2008 ballot and canceled. Public resources would be better spent on just about anything else, including delta levies, roads, prisons and schools.

The rail authority wants to link Sacramento and the San Francisco Bay Area to Los Angeles and San Diego by building a rail system for trains traveling at more than 200 mph. Established in 1996 and made a permanent agency in 2002, it has worked to convince politicians and voters that a bullet train is a viable alternative to building more roads and airports.

Unfortunately, the system's financial plan is weak. A Federal Transit Administration review of urban rail projects in such cities as Miami, Baltimore, Atlanta and Washington, released in the early 1990s, shows that cost and ridership estimates issued by public agencies are invariably too optimistic. Given the exceptional scope of its plan, the high-speed rail authority's figures ap-

pear to be no exception.

Even if the cost of precision, high-technology railways running hundreds of miles — routed through tunnels under mountain ranges and grade separated at more than 1,000 intersections — did not exceed the \$40 billion the authority projects, the system would never recoup its capital costs through fares and fees. To do that, the fare for a ride on the mythical bullet train would have to be about twice as high as that for an average-priced ticket on a commercial aircraft. Transportation that is slower — and more expensive — than aircraft cannot compete with aircraft.

Europe has a high-speed rail system that out-competes cars and planes for trips ranging from 120 miles to 230 miles, but there are good reasons for that. Gasoline prices in Europe are, at a minimum, twice those in California. Airline deregulation came late to Europe, making it more expensive to fly in those countries. More Americans than Europeans use their cars to make trips longer than 300 miles, and more Americans than Europeans board low-cost jets to travel to destinations less than 500 miles away. Even with environments better suited to high-speed rail service, the Japanese and Europeans still have to subsidize their systems.

The 2004 train bombings in Madrid demonstrate a lethal point: Trains are a security nightmare. The safe operation of a high-speed train system requires securing the entire right of way. The 2005 Metrolink crash near Glendale was caused by a Jeep Cherokee deliberately

parked on the tracks at an intersection. We do not have the means to secure rail rights of way adequately in the Los Angeles area, much less for a new statewide network. Airplanes are secured at airports. Once they are in the air, security problems are virtually eliminated.

California's population growth and strong economy may eventually overtax the capacity of its airports, but airports are much cheaper to build or expand than a high-speed rail network. A new, top-of-the-line airport might run about \$10 billion. A substantial increase in capacity at LAX would cost about the same, but \$5 billion would buy a lot of airport in Palmdale because land there is cheaper.

If airport congestion became acute, airfares would rise, which would effectively curb air-travel demand in the short term. Eventually, though, the day will come when regional and national interests will require greater airport capacity, and cities and counties may have to use eminent domain to expand their metropolitan airports. If we feel civic guilt about this, displaced residents should receive a premium above market value for their property. Such generosity would still cost only a small fraction of a statewide high-speed rail system.

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LETTERS

'Some choices are worth the expected extra cost.'

ANDREW KAY LIBERMAN, *Santa Monica*

Pluses, minuses of super-rail system

Re "Bullet trains won't get us anywhere," *Current*, Feb. 11

James Moore seems to love air travel and disdain train travel. He also disparages the safety of train travel, yet it surely is safer than travel by car and is probably safer than travel by air. Perhaps most important, his analysis never mentions that planes must be fueled by oil, inevitably adding carbon to Earth's atmosphere.

In contrast, trains can run on electricity, which can be generated by solar and wind power. Indeed, in California, such power can be generated in close proximity to a San Francisco-to-Los Angeles railway right of way. Or one from L.A. to Las Vegas.

BEN ZUCKERMAN
*UCLA professor of physics
and astronomy
Los Angeles*

Moore argues that the cost is prohibitive for a super-rail system linking San Francisco, L.A. and San Diego. He says that building more airports is cheaper and more efficient than a statewide super-rail system. But some choices are worth the expected extra cost.

Rail in the rest of the world is popular and safe. More airports are unsightly and bring massive congestion on the roads (witness LAX). And a sophisticated statewide rail system could bring commerce to new places in California. Contrary to Moore's perspective, a bullet train would be a viable alternative to building more roads and airports.

ANDREW KAY LIBERMAN
Santa Monica

It appears that Moore fails to appreciate the causal link between transportation and land use. High-speed trains would not only serve as an alternate means of transportation in the state, they would encourage more sustainable forms of development. Similar to how freeways encourage low-density growth, bullet trains would encourage and make possible true transit-oriented development — the pinnacle of "smart growth."

Imagine walking from home somewhere in the Central Valley to the train station and being in Silicon Valley or Los Angeles in less than an hour. Imagine the number of cars taken off the road and the amount of exhaust not emitted. This system could dramatically reshape land-use patterns in the state, and for that reason alone we must pursue it. It is not simply a question of utility in the present but rather potential for the future.

DANIEL VANWIE
San Jose

Moore hit the nail right on the head when he called for the elimination of the group heading up the study of a bullet train for California. Without a car payment and insurance, the train may be an economical option, but not for the California masses with cars that go door to door.

Another problem is that there would be no competition for California's bullet train to keep prices in line. A government-run program is doomed to be a high-cost failure at both ends — building it and running it. There are better ways to spend the money.

MIKE MANCUSO
San Jose