Bonds Wait for Credible Plan

TREASURER PUNCTURES HSRA VALLEY AMBITIONS

California State Treasurer Bill Lockyer, in a March 11 interview with Channel 4 NBC News in Los Angeles, confronted the idea of bond funds for high-speed rail head on. He explained that the financial markets have no belief in the project, because it does not have a credible business plan, therefore there is no potential to sell any significant quantity of rail bonds until that problem is resolved.

Perhaps coincidentally, one week later on March 18, the High Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) published a hastily-written Request for Proposal for financial advice. It is replete with typos and evaluation formulas that don’t add up to cited scores for particular functions.

The Authority hopes to award the financial consulting contract to a vendor on April 11, asking for a new ridership study and other data to be delivered in time for an October legislative deadline.

What’s going on here? Insiders sense a bit of panic in the document. HSRA has never before responded in a serious way to the Legislature’s demand for a bonafide business plan, but Lockyer’s candor at a sensitive time could undermine the Authority’s ability to gather more soft federal grant money, the kind that can be expended for engineering or environmental hours without any end product being delivered. That would mean the end of the real train, the gravy train.

(continued on Page 2)
Lockyer’s critique suggests that HSRA is just pumping billions to its consultant teams with no real train in prospect for California. The Authority helped reinforce that impression at its March 30 meeting, when it yet again changed scope of the project, but did not provide cost estimates or detailed ridership numbers. The Authority has designed a plan, but it doesn’t look like you guys know what you’re doing.”

Lockyer: That’s what they’re saying.

NBCLA: Really? What do you think?

Lockyer: Well, I think the same thing.

NBCLA: But you voted for it, you told me.

Lockyer: I’m a dreamer, like Californians are. I’d love to see improved intercity transportation and dealing with traffic and all kinds of transportation issues. But this one, if it worked, if it was real, great. But so far we don’t have a plan that would show that it makes any sense.

NBCLA: Well, they argue, and they’ve been on this program, that we’re going to put a shovel in the ground, next year, it’s going to be in the Central Valley, and yes it’s not between two major urban areas, but we need to build this leg any how, it’s low lying fruit, we’re going to pick it first, we’re under a deadline from the Federal government to get some of the federal money, and that you know that the Interstate freeway system didn’t start in New York, it started in Missouri.

Lockyer: Well, OK (laughs).

NBCLA: That’s their response. We’ve got to do this anyhow, why not start here.

Lockyer: Well, here’s the problem. With the Interstate System, there was an identified gas tax funding system that was going to be stable and reliable for decades. Our law says you can’t use any state tax money to subsidize this rail line, so you can go out and dig a shovel wherever you want (laughs), you can build it. If you can’t run it, you can’t sell the bonds that are necessary to do the construction phase.

NBCLA: Since the voters voted for it by about 52 to 48—it was fairly close—do you have to do something, or is there an option not to build it?

Lockyer: There are actually requirements for all the bonds—schoolls, highways, etcetera that, even though the authorization has been made by the voters, the Legislature and Governor have to approve the specific projects in the future. So they’re going to have to go back to the Legislature, show that they’ve got a real deal here or it won’t go.

NBCLA: But right now, Wall Street’s not interested?

Lockyer: They’re interested in the sense of well, if it ever works out, we’d love to be involved in the financing, but privately, they all say so far, we haven’t seen a plan yet either.

SPEAK UP TODAY TO KEEP AMTRAK SERVICE

Amtrak California passengers need to make their voices heard in the state budget process if they want to keep service. On congress.org you can send a message to your legislators today. Point out that Section 209 of the PRIIA bill means major cuts in service. $25 million is how much the High Speed Rail Authority spends in two weeks, but it keeps half of the Pacific Surfliner route operating for a year.
California’s Central Valley, considered just a year ago to be a bedrock of support for California’s high-speed rail project, has erupted with opposition to plans for elevated 220 mph trains and new takings of high-value agricultural lands. Farmers and civic leaders in Merced, Chowchilla, Madera, Fresno, Hanford, Corcoran, and Bakersfield have pushed back against HSRA plans they view as deeply flawed.

“From very early on, I had deep concerns about elevated tracks through our city,” Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin was quoted in the Fresno Bee March 27. Such structures, she said, would create “a visual dividing wall in our community.”

Swearengin and others claim credit for forcing HSRA to reconsider the miles of elevated structure that were to bisect Fresno, just one of a number of setbacks to HSRA’s attempt to fast-track a sketchy plan for a constantly shape-shifting Merced to Bakersfield starter route.

Questions about whether the Authority is delivering on its promises and in pushing for outreach initiatives to mitigate public opinion have intensified since CalWatchdog.com obtained a February 14 e-mail from Van Ark through a Public Records Act request.

It apparently shows Van Ark directing public relations subcontractor Jo Linda Thompson to groove up support among other HSRA subcontractors at a Fresno congressional hearing: “Trust that you are also helping to ensure that the labor out in full force to flood any negative contributors,” Van Ark wrote.

A story in Bay Area Newsgroup by CalWatchdog observed that HSRA’s idea of outreach seems to be “making sure the voices advocating bullet trains drown out those that one of a number of setbacks to HSRA’s attempt to fast-track a sketchy plan for a constantly shape-shifting Merced to Bakersfield starter route.

More serious PR problems emerged at a March 17 joint hearing by the Assembly Agriculture Committee and Assembly Appropriations Subcommittee chaired intermittently by Assembly Member Cathleen Galgiani that drew a crowd of 150 people, mostly from the ag community, objecting to the Authority’s violation of AB 3034 rules that farmers believe forced the Authority to use existing transportation corridors. Van Ark and two consultants who spoke on condemnation and eminent domain issues were hit with hours of critical commentary.

Frank Oliveira, a LeMoore, CA-based farmer, pointed out that the current proposed line diverts from BNSF to pass “through the best farm ground in King’s County.”

He observed that HSRA seemed to have “gone out of their way to be as destructive as possible” to Valley agriculture.

Farmers say the route favored by HSRA is far more costly than one avoiding their nuis tree groves, but the Authority’s objections to the impacts, not cost. Fourth-generation Kings County grower John Tos, quoted in the Fresno Bee, valued his orchards at about $140,000 per acre.

“It sounds like money will fix all the problems,” Tos said. “That’s not why we’re here. Our way of life will be changed forever, and we don’t want that.” Instead of dividing farm property, the Authority was supposed to follow the path of BNSF or Interstate 5, Tos said.

Even more pointed in his critique was almond and pistachio farmer Kole Upton, a Merced County constituent of Assembly Member Galgiani. Recounting how the Authority’s preferred route disrupts a whole line of drilled wells as well as an entire canal-based water distribution system affecting dozens of farmers, he observed that HSRA seemed to have “gone out of their way to be as destructive as possible” to Valley agriculture.

Upton described a June 17, 2010 meeting of local agencies with AECOM which includes about 90 miles (67 km) of track between the Pacheco Pass to the Valley Line.

Assembly UNREST SPOOKS HSRA NATIVE PROPOSES VAN ARK... make presentations.

“Everybody agreed it should be south of the city of Chowchilla. And yet three weeks later in an epiphany at the Fairmaid open house, they come out with this, one of the routes is going to be south of Chowchilla,” Upton said.

On March 3, the Transportation Agency of Monterey County (TAMC) led a survey of the Union Pacific ran the service out of the troubled Bay Bridge East Span asymmetrical link later this year, nearly $10 billion over budget. So the Authority now faces questions about a $46 million account requested by Richard F. Tolmach

Coast Observations

WILL JERRY BROWN ACT to reform the High Speed Rail Authority, or let it continue to spend state funds on questionable engineering ideas like 220 mph elevated structures 60 feet above Madera, Fresno, and Bakersfield? This year’s legislative agenda for transportation will be key. But appointments to BT&H in April will give the definitive answer...

CALTRANS DIRECTOR CINDY MCKIM is widely expected to resign ahead of erection of the troubled Bay Bridge East Span asymmetrical link later this year, nearly $10 billion over budget. So the Authority now faces questions about a $46 million account...
Metrolink announced plans for a new pilot program to expand its service with 16 additional trains every weekday beginning in May 8, while keeping operating costs roughly at present levels.

The service reform will add flexibility for passengers, particularly on morning and evening trips. Savings were obtained by making numerous small adjustments, increasing departures, holding the line on costs.

Two new Chatsworth trains, six new Antioch Valley trains, and two new Burman Express in San Bernardino trains and two new Burbank Airport trains will be operated, some of which will be late evening departures, stretching Metrolink's span of service.

Most of the improvements will be in the morning and afternoon peak hour express services, including ones on the Antioch Valley and San Bernardino routes. These services will save passengers up to an hour each day on their commute round trip.

Concurrently, Metro is operating shuttle buses connecting Los Angeles Union Station to and from the Angel Stadium, and Metrolink is running special late night departures from Los Angeles Union Station. The Dodger service was started in late March, and will run for weekend games the entire season.

A similar late night train service from Angel Stadium started April 8. Expanded peak hour Orange County service is scheduled to start in July.

On the marketing side, Metrolink is targeting non-commuters, including students, opened up by its expanded service, such as its Antioch Valley and Santa Clarita services. Metrolink and Anaheim, as well as hospitals and other-night employers finally made accessible with weekend service. Metrolink will also replace its troublesome punch ticket, a source of friction between train and bus passengers.

A new 7-day unlimited travel pass, which is sold. This is a superior offer in terms of price, and will help introduce new riders who may be buying monthly passes.

The City of Sacramento has expended over $100 million in federal funds to buy Sacramento Metrolink, as part of the City's troubled railroad development project. The cash more quickly spent, the worse conditions become.

City Council action in late March will express to the public a plan to retrain the Amtrak platforms to a remote location 1070 feet north of the ticket windows, 900 feet north of light rail connections, 1200 feet from Amtrak bus platforms, and about 1500 feet from parking. The remote platforms will lack ticket machines or any other passenger services, so only physically fit people can use the train without great effort.

Because this disadvantage seniors and the disabled, as well as the platform, Amtrak may be counting an ADA discrimination suit. No mobility aids are planned.

It is hard to see effectiveness in this “marketing.” Black and white makes the train seem outdated, and a comparison to fast food is not a compelling sales message. The missed opportunity to compare Amtrak against high gasoline prices this spring is quite a puzzle—that is, unless you are aware that the blue blob is Caltrans.
ACE PLOTS FASTER ALTAMONT

By Robert Reynolds and Richard Tolmach

Under Altamont Commuter Express (ACE) leadership, a High Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) study has identified a much faster, more direct Altamont line which could cut current rail travel time by about half. Presented at the February 3 HSRA board meeting, preliminary study findings were adopted unanimously by the Board.

Last summer, CRN reported on ACE studies of a new route as well as an independent study of Altamont routes by the European firm Setec funded by the California Rail Foundation. The two route studies found common ground on the majority of route mileage, including a line through the hills south of Pleasanton.

ACE’s Manager of Public Affairs and Community Relations Thomas Reeves has previously predicted that the ambitious three-phase upgrade could start within three years with right of way purchases, a line item that ACE Executive Director Stacey Mortenson pegged at a program cost of “upwards of $200 million.” The first hurdle Reeves identified, the completion of an Environmental Impact Report for the corridor, is now underway.

Recently the HSRA provided some refinements to the thirty route segments proposed for study as part of the earlier Scoping Phase. The Alternatives Analysis has reduced the number of feasible rights of way considerably, especially in the approaches to Silicon Valley and in the Tri-Valley area (Pleasanton-Livermore). Silicon Valley approaches into the East Bay from Sunol saw three routes eliminated out of five, including two through the beautiful, winding Niles Canyon.

Constructability, speed and environmental considerations ruled out Niles Canyon. At the same time routes between the Warm Springs Bay Area Rapid Transit station and San Jose Diridon station were screened from five possible to two.

The process eliminated three of five Tri-Valley alignment alternatives as well, due to active local opposition to lines through the center of Pleasanton and Livermore. Between Fremont and the San Joaquin Valley, only entirely new routes are now being studied, the currently used Union Pacific trackage having been rejected at the outset.

“Rail officials will look at several routes and stations as they meet with local leaders before beginning work on the environmental review,” according to a John Wildermuth story in the San Francisco Chronicle. “Pleasanton officials, for example, have made it clear they don’t want the rail line to run through the city’s downtown, while Livermore has concerns about the effect an aerial line would have on the downtown area.”

On the other hand, according to Denis Cuff reporting in the Contra Costa Times, “Tracy officials are eager to welcome high-speed rail at or near their new inter-modal transit center, an anchor spot for boosting the downtown...”

Currently, ACE stops in Tracy at a station far removed from the new transit center. While the Alternatives Analysis has not ruled out the current ACE station Tracy officials have made clear signals that they strongly prefer an alignment through their city.

Cuff also noted “…Union City officials see high-speed rail as having potential to boost the city’s redevelopment area, where an inter-modal transit center was built next to the BART station…”. Gary Perazzo reported on the transit center in the September 2005 edition of CRN, “Union City Plans Intermodal Station.”

According to Wildermuth, “High-speed rail officials already have eliminated routes that would have run through environmentally sensitive wetlands in Santa Clara and Alameda Counties and agreed to a tunnel under Sycamore Grove Park in Livermore if needed.” It’s interesting that HSRA believes in tunnels only in locations its staff doesn’t want a line.

Because the ambience of the park’s northern edge is already compromised by three major high-voltage power lines at the same location as the rail line, alternate mitigations, such as funding park expansion may be far more practical.

HSRA plans show a 7-mile tunnel to traverse 1.5 miles of park, as well as severe grades on the south side, which handicap the alternative with cost and engineering problems. Devoting $30 million to expand the park in the hills would be far more reasonable than spending an extra billion dollars or more on a tunnel.

At the February HSRA board meeting, the California Rail Foundation lauded the joint HSRA-ACE work and said the route should be seriously considered for the primary high-speed rail access to the Bay Area because of its superior speeds and lack of negative impacts upon communities. CPR pointed out that the route was considered by Setec to have 220 mph potential on most of its extension.

ACE says that the revamp of its route will eventually give the heavily congested I-580/680 corridor major new capacity and a 5 minute travel time between the San Joaquin and Silicon Valley endpoints. The ACE/HSRA plan also includes a line running east from Tracy to the BNSF line north of Modesto, using State Highway 120 medians and an undeveloped highway right-of-way from Manteca to near Riverbank. Current pricing of the entire project, before any value engineering, is $6 billion.

The timetable for the ACE EIR anticipates a draft in 2012 and completion in 2013. ACE’s expansion is clearly on track.

WHEREace OVERLAPS SETEC

To avoid any impacts to subdivision west of Vallecitos Road, line runs through foothills via cuts and a tunnel, avoiding tight curves.

HSR & ACE EXPRESS ROUTE

The power line right-of-way, continuing straight where 680 veers off to the north, is so straight it cuts 10 miles from the ACE route and makes possible line speeds double to triple those of Union Pacific.

European HSR design firm Setec suggested the Fremont to South Livermore line shown above, which is nearly identical to ACE’s proposed new line and tunnels included by helpful HSRA officials.
By Michael E. McGinley P.E.

High-speed rail, when done right, offers compelling reasons for Californians to invest in this infrastructure of the future. Compared to other transportation modes, a network of high-speed and conventional passenger rail transportation is better in terms of:

- **Energy:** Total energy per passenger mile is far lower than autos or airplanes
- **Fuel Independence:** Electric power for rail transport needs no petroleum
- **Land Use:** Much less land than highways or airports
- **Air Quality/Greenhouse Gases:** Can use least polluting sources of energy
- **Safety:** much better than highway travel
- **Accessibility:** Available to all, compared to auto and aircraft modes

With these potential benefits in mind, California and the nation have embarked on programs to build high-speed rail. While California was moving forward, the first increments of investment of the public’s tax funds must be made following the principle of value for money. TRAC recommends that the High Speed Rail Authority and transportation planning agencies throughout California pursue passenger transportation (including HSR) that is:

- **Conservatively designed for lowest cost consistent with project goals**
- **Immediately and incrementally useful to expand travel on existing services**
- **Connected to, and supportive of, local and regional public transit**
- **Capable of future increases of speed, capacity, and network destinations**
- **Not exclusive to one region or route to the exclusion of others**

Let’s look at how these principles apply to California’s investment in passenger transportation.

**Conservatively designed for lowest cost consistent with project goals**

Investments of public (or investor) funds must be constrained by the requirement that these funds are used to obtain the maximum benefit and are never wasted that these funds are used to obtain the maximum benefit and are never wasted that these funds are used to obtain the maximum benefit and are never wasted that these funds are used to obtain the maximum benefit and are never wasted that these funds are used to obtain the maximum benefit and are never wasted. Each of the above examples projects brings immediate utility to the traveling public. (However, a trackless new line from Bakersfield to southern Madera County has no near term value.)

**Connected to, and supportive of, local and regional public transit**

First, “do no harm.” Where HSR lines make use of existing public transportation corridors, HSR should not constrain future improvements to the corridors. (As now designed, the HSRA lines following some rail lines “lock in” all existing highway grade crossings; this is an unacceptable negative impact on future public safety.)

Second, all public transportation systems are mutually supportive: they are a network. Every destination on any route in a network adds trip opportunities and public utility to the whole network. Conventional connections between modes (both as designed for walking and as operated for efficiency) are key to attracting riders from highway travel.

This goal of efficient connections is an institutional challenge as each agency seeks to minimize costs and fears loss of control over their local jurisdictions. Planning for all of California’s transportation investments must be a “team sport.” This includes California’s airports, which have historically resisted public transit connections.

**Capable of future increases of speed, capacity, and network destinations**

While California cannot afford to build a complete HSR system that covers most of the state for many years, there should be an evolving master plan for eventually placing high-quality HSR lines within reach of the majority of citizens. To this end, each segment should be constructed with provisions for increasing speed and for adding future connections to additional lines; it is a waste of public funds to demolish recently-constructed infrastructure due to poor planning. An example of such multi-staged planning would be to build an economical, modest-speed line from Bakersfield to the Los Angeles basin.

To save construction costs some tunnels, bridges, and segments of track could be built as a single line of track (with passing sidings). As traffic levels increase in future years, sections of double track could be added. Provisions for a connection toward Victoria and Los Vegas could be included in the design.

**Not exclusive to one region or route to the exclusion of others**

California has many important transportation corridors; adoption of one route for HSR should not mean that the other corridors are neglected. One example of a “non-exclusive” corridor is Highway 101 through Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Paso Robles, King City, and Salinas. While this corridor is not a fast, straight route from San Francisco to Los Angeles and the population would not support a multi-billion dollar HSR line, these citizens need transportation options. Incremental improvements to the existing rail line (faster speeds, more stations, passing sidings) could result in a very useful corridor similar to the Surfliner or San Joaquin lines and such an upgraded line would add destinations to the state’s evolving network.

Another example of a “non-exclusive” concept is the choice of route between the Bay Area and coastal counties. There is no single best route. The fastest route from the Bay Area to the cities in the northern part of the valley is Altamont Pass, and the fastest route toward Los Angeles is either Pacheco or Panoche Pass if 125 mph speeds on the Peninsula can be achieved. Perhaps the answer is to plan for both, build the least expensive one first, and then build a second route when traffic builds up and it is needed.

**Conclusion**

High-speed rail is a wonderful solution to some, but not all, of California’s transportation and environmental needs. A comprehensive transportation infrastructure will include local, regional, and high-speed rail lines, urban and suburban bus and transit lines, airports, and highways. One mode cannot do it all. Yet, if the conservation planning concepts are complex and require collaboration of stakeholders; they cannot be expressed in sound bites or political slogans. Perhaps there is no point in making them simple. It is too easy because it sounds so simple and futuristic. Political leaders and the media are not noted for patience and in explaining complex issues. TRAC (and other public interest groups) may be able to communicate these planning concepts to the public.
CAM BEACH A Proponent of Practical Rail Solutions

San Francisco MTA Board Director Cameron Beach died March 18 at his home of apparent cardiac arrest. A semi-retired transportation consultant and former chief operating officer at Sacramento Regional Transit (RT), Beach was 62.

Born in San Francisco, Beach grew up riding Muni and started driving charter buses after high school, and had a 44-year career in public transit. Beach was a respected professional who knew the ins and outs of transit operations. He joined Sacramento RT in 1981 to work on labor relations, and was named in 1983 as the light rail startup manager.

Tom Matoff, former General Manager of RT, who promoted Beach to Chief Operating Officer at Sacramento RT, hailed his ability to devise solutions to problems that would stymie others.

"After earlier management of RT claimed the 60 percent single track light rail line wouldn’t work, Cam showed not only that it would, but maintained an on-time performance equivalent to that of more highly capitalized systems like BART."

Beach created the new rail division at RT to run the 18.5 mile original route from scratch, and kept it efficient and lightly staffed. He was a hands-on manager, and often was seen riding trains and buses, and working in the dispatch office even at night.

"Cam built a culture at RT of focusing on operational detail," RT General Manager Mike Wiley told the Sacramento Bee. "He helped create a vision of the customer first and providing service with the highest possible quality and lowest possible costs."

Beach retired from RT in 2006 and moved to San Francisco. Before his appointment to the SFMTA Board in 2007, Beach served on the board of the Market Street Railway where he met his wife, Carmen Clark, a former Muni and CAm BeACH A Proponent of Practical Rail Solutions

San Francisco County Transportation Authority official, said Rick Laubscher, a close friend and the head of the non-profit preservation group.

"Cam Beach’s loss to this city is hard to overestimate. He loved Muni more than anyone I ever knew – not for what it was, because he knew its shortcomings all too well – but for what it could be, in terms of serving riders properly and empowering mobility in his native city," Laubscher wrote in a comment on Streetsblog.org.

SAVE THE DATE! Friday 6pm gathering at Philippe’s, then Rail Pub Crawl. Saturday conference sessions at Metro. Sunday Expo Trip. For favorable advance rates, please visit calrailnews.com today.