by Richard F. Tolmach

A joint meeting of two Senate oversight committees on December 5 grilled newly appointed board members of the High Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) about its draft business plan issued November 1. Senators had sharp questions about where the capital will come from, the likelihood of subsidy and the overall value of spending $8 billion dollars for an inoperable Central Valley starter line.

Sen. Joe Simitian (D-Palo Alto), told HSRA officials there would be a serious discussion on whether the project goes back on the ballot or “we just say give it up because the dollars aren’t going to be there in the long-haul.” Simitian urged caution. “In all due respect, accessing 3 billion dollars unwisely if it’s going to cost us $100 billion isn’t anything I want to rush forward with.”

The Legislative Analyst’s Office openly challenged HSRA claims about the need to start construction by September 2012 to save $2.3 billion in federal stimulus funds. Farra Bracht, LAO Managing Principal Analyst, said her office reviewed grant agreements and did not find any construction start deadline. She said she had not been given the location of the start-of-construction language by either HSRA or the Dept. of Finance, although it was requested months ago.

Sen. Simitian asked HSRA to provide the language by noon, December 16. Senator Mark DeSaulnier added, “…unless your administrative officer has gone to another planet, this is a pretty direct question that we need to have answered. Senator Simitian has been more than kind to give you two weeks to provide the information.”

Legislators seem to have reached the end of their patience. Instead of delivering a fundable plan with private industry support, clear benefits and low risk, the Authority proposes to break its promises to taxpayers and gamble $98.5 billion on a political pork-barrel no private investors will touch.

It would seem far more practical to acknowledge California’s fiscal limitations and propose a project the state can actually afford to complete this decade. For example, it should cost only $7 billion to fill the Bakersfield to San Fernando gap in California’s rail network, but the agency doesn’t want to do anything that simple. Despite $12 billion in funds, the Authority would build only an inoperable segment in the Central Valley and not deliver through San Francisco-Anaheim service until 2033.

The “new and improved” business plan still fails to answer the basic questions from legislators who have been asking the Authority for three years how it would find private funds for an operable segment. Even more seriously, there is a threat the Authority will try to press ahead with a vastly overpriced 300 mile Merced-Sylmar line with California taxpayers bearing 100 percent of the risk, since the Business Plan identifies no means of involving private capital in the project design phase. Gov. Jerry Brown’s uncritical support of the agency may have unwittingly doomed the controversial project. The project badly needed a haircut, but instead its price tag ballooned 300 percent from the $32 billion

(continued on Page 2)
promised voters in 2008 for a system with the same mileage. The inflated price reveals that the governor’s team never pushed project managers to slash the obvious pork.

Most of the price escalation was not from inflation, but new capital added in the past two years. The Phase I network has 138 to 201 miles in the 2009 plan and has added 20 extra miles of tunnels. Since 2009, the cost of the California Rail News

Page 3-5 of the plan states, “California has in New York City.”

HSRA’s ridership projections don’t seem possible, let alone conservative. Merced traffic also constitutes three-quarters of all Central Valley ridership on the Initial Operating Segment-South, a clear signal that the controversial ridership model is still broken. That is a major concern, because California taxpayers could be on the hook for billions of dollars of subsidy on top of the construction cost if politicians are stumped into proceeding without private capital backing the project or proof that the line will be profitable.

No leap of faith was needed by the French government on feasibility of fast trains, since 12.2 million riders already use conventional trains in the Southeast and 17 million on the Atlantique. Increases produced by high-speed rail in the first decade of fast service were only 5.3 million annual riders on TGV-Southeast and 6.7 million on TGV-Atlantique.

Compared with five European startups ranging from 5.3 million to 6.7 million new riders after a decade, HSRA’s “medium” projection of 36.8 million new riders on a Phase I system by its 10th year (Page 6-13 of the Business Plan) is dislocated from reality. The Authority’s “medium” traffic claim is more new ridership than happened on five European systems together (see below). Those networks together serve a population of about 90 million, have a track extent of 1000 miles and service extending over 2000 route miles. The claim that California’s rail traffic will grow to nearly 40 million annually on a single wounding $20 mile line that fails to serve regional Southern California markets or the Capitol Corridor is just not credible.

Despite repeated assurances from Gov. Brown’s new appointees, the High Speed Rail Authority is clearly incapable of delivering a viable project. The time has come to shut down this wasteful agency and seek competitive proposals from private industry.

Instead of letting bureaucrats design a fantasy project based on a wish for $98.5 billion, a better formula, one followed by Texas and Florida, is to ask successful high-speed rail operating companies to demonstrate what could be built matching the existing $12 billion of public funding with private capital.

Railroad operating companies are much more capable and experienced than public agencies at the tasks of drawing up reasonable plans and of convincing banks and investors that their projects are financially sound. The project California is eventually presented with might not be so vast as what is currently proposed, but it is far likelier to actually provide service within our lifetimes.
Kevin McCarthy (R-Bakersfield) say the speed rail previously given to California. Railroad Administration grants for high-say they want rescission of prior Federal capital programs for intercity passenger rail and the enforcement of PRIIA Section 209. One program which was protected ond year since the national system’s establishment. It’s not going to be attractive, in my opinion to riders. And you need rid-ers”… A CAlIFORnIA FIELD POll

Democrats tried to keep cuts off Amtrak, which has had a record ridership year, with traffic exceeding 30 million for only the sec-ond year since the national system’s establish-ment. One program which was protected from harm was state-supported routes, on which Federal funds will continue flowing and the enforcement of FRA Section 209 provisions will wait until FY 2013. In addition, both houses voted to strip all 2012 funding for high-speed rail or new capital programs for intercity passenger rail service, a provision described by many media sources as “killing high-speed rail.”

Key California caucus Republicans also say they are concerned about the federal Railroad Administration grants for high-speed rail previously given to California. California’s Jeff Denham (R-Arrow), and Kevin McCarthy (R-Bakersfield) say the

California project is a mess and became unafford-able when its cost tripled to $98.5 billion. McCarthy has introduced legislation that project as poorly planned and managed. McCarthy has introduced legislation that would freeze federal funding for the project and subject it to a comprehensive review. The December 14 House hearing was chaired by Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.). Mica has been a consistent high-speed rail supporter, citing the Northeast Corridor as being an optimum site for a project. However, Mica has become increasingly skeptical about the California’s Central Valley starter.

Even if the House were to rescind all or a portion of the California funding, the U.S. Senate would have to agree before the money was lost. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) is a strong supporter of the project. However, Northeast Corridor senators far outweigh Feinstein’s clout, since there are dozens of them, nearly a quarter of the Senate, plus colleges under their influence from bordering states. Realocating the California grants would have to be agreed upon by the Senate, plus colleges under their influence from bordering states. Realocating the California grants would have to be agreed upon by the Senate, plus colleges under their influence. The two congressmen want $3.3 billion in federal grants rescinded. Denham, a subcom-mittee chair on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said he believes all of the project’s grants can be rescinded by Congress and should have been reallocated to a delayed Highway 99 reconstruction project in the Central Valley. The Los Angeles Times reported the California grants were formatting plans to sequelster high-speed funds which have not been put under contract. McCarthy has introduced legislation that would freeze federal funding for the project and subject it to a comprehensive review. The December 14 House hearing was chaired by Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.). Mica has been a consistent high-speed rail supporter, citing the Northeast Corridor as being an optimum site for a project. However, Mica has become increasingly skeptical about the California’s Central Valley starter.

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A PLAN FOR FASTER L.A. CONNECTIONS IN OUR LIFETIME

Opinion By Richard F. Tolmach

Now that the High Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) has imperiously declared that it will delay implementation of through tracks at Los Angeles Union Station until approximately 2033, perhaps it is time to rethink how to obtain a modern passenger rail service that traverses Los Angeles before the rest of one’s life flashes past.

The feeling of a massive wasted time is ubiquitous in the vast terminal. The fact that its biggest space is the Waiting Room says it all. Seats are deeply cushioned for multi-hour stays and many of those using them seem to be long term residents.

Passengers transferring from Amtrak buses to trains or vice-versa typically lose over an hour there. Connections between Metrolink and Amtrak are even worse, set randomly so that one may barely make a connection, wait nearly three hours.

The sense that your time has become worthless begins as your train slows for the 10 mph curve at Mission Tower and creeps towards the platform, a process which may take 5 minutes or more before doors open. Then there are inevitable 3 to 5 minute queues to exit, exacerbated by outnumbered platform designs.

Even local connections take a lot of time and effort, involving major changes of grade. Access from the Metro Subway platform to Metrolink or Amtrak platforms requires an additional 7 minute walk involving a ascent of 45 feet, a lot of trouble even for the physically fit, some escalators are not provided the whole way. Also, access was not optimized for passengers by subway engineers. Huge unused unused areas minimizes needlessly increase passenger delay and walking distance.

Instead of being trainside, Amtrak and other bus connections are even further away from the trains than before, and most first-time users need a guide to find them.

Decades of Future Delay?

Union Station may be a good place for delay implementation of through tracks at Los Angeles Union Station and another 5 minutes on Metrolink or Amtrak.

3. Ventura and San Fernando

For local passengers on Metrolink or Amtrak, savings are about 12 minutes compared to transferring at Union Station. Passenger would save 5 minutes in walking distance to underground Red/Purple Line platforms and another 7 minutes from not having to ride through all the courses on the Gold Line.

2. Orange/Fullerton/SD

Passenger needs are prioritized with an H-shaped platform and open concourse. Buses and light rail are upstairs.

Easier Progress on a Bypass?

Today, a faster track through Los Angeles entirely misses Union Station. This avoids the Union Station’s 5 minute access and 5 minute egress, its 15 to 30 minute dwell time, along with dispatching waits at choke point mysterious interruptions in lighting or air conditioning, and crew changes from one end of the train to the other. Instead of 20 to 40 minutes of terminal delay, here about one tenth that amount of waiting. Instead of a slow crawl in and out of the terminal, trains would go from 70 mile per hour speeds to a full stop, in seconds, just like elimination in the Southern California network.

La Grande was the old location of the Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe Railway terminal, and it has some significant geographic and strategic advantages. The site already has tracks of Metro Gold, Red, and Purple lines, Amtrak Surfliners as well as Metrolink Route 91 and Orange County trains. None of the trains stops currently.

If a motivated Metrolink staff can find the resources together with Metro and Caltrans to eliminate cubicle thinking and explore the possibilities, a very economic efficient transfer station could be constructed at the First Street Bridge. The unique site has potential for much easier transfers between Amtrak, Metrolink, and Metro Red and Purple Lines. The Metro Gold Line is just upstairs at the First Street Bridge.

Building for Regional Needs

An optimally designed transfer station could be created using existing public lands at the La Grande site. Since it is a new facility, it can be built rapidly and economically, with platforms being optimized for through all the curves on the Gold Line.

Strategic Location

La Grande, with its mainline position, makes possible through service without expense of an elevated $1.5 billion through track, and avoids the sharp curves at north and south ends of the Union Station diversion.

3.5 min. to La Grande Civic Center

1.5 min to La Grande

Potential Shuttle to Blue Line

5.5 min. to La Grande Platforms

3.5 min. to Little Tokyo/Arts Dist.

2. Orange County Train Station

La Grande Platforms

Passenger Concourse, Services, and Security

Escalators/Access to Gold Line/Buses

Map Graphics: can work for each using LACMTA data

Aerial Photo:USDAN Farm Service Agency

Passenger needs are prioritized with an H-shaped platform and open concourse. Buses and light rail are upstairs.

eliminating longer walking access to the platform.

An Idea Worth a Fresh Look

Metrolink staff should be encouraged to further study the benefits of alternativas that could produce more service running through Los Angeles. Not just the La Grande site idea, but other Metrolink platforms transfers and quick reversal of Metrolink trains at the existing site bear consideration.

Just because HSRA thinks 2033 is an appropriate date for Los Angeles progress doesn’t mean anyone else should sit on their hands. We’ve all done enough waiting at Union Station to know faster connections need to come very soon.
Despite massive press coverage given to high-speed rail plans, the 512-mile Metrolink network radiating from Los Angeles has been the focus of much of California’s rail progress over the past decade. Metrolink now runs 163 trains daily, and has fine-tuned service quality to become the most reliable rail network in California. Its current goal for on-time performance is 97 percent.

New Unlimited Use Passes

Weekday peak trains are Metrolink’s primary business, but ridership is up 20 percent on weekends since launch of the Metrolink All-Weekend Pass, a $10 fare which offers unlimited travel from 7 p.m. Fridays to midnight Sunday for a set rate. The weekend offer has long-term benefits for the network, because new commuters often experiment trying the train on weekends before relying on it for home-to-work trips.

Another effective promotion has been the 7-day pass, a transplanted European idea which replaces the harder to enforce 10-ride ticket with a similarly priced ticket which can be used up to a week from purchase. Its convenience is so appealing, it is likely to draw traffic both from monthlies and single rides, as well as grow the number of 7-day pass commuters.

Feeder Buses Given a Try

Metrolink has also been successfully experimenting with buses to add new destinations, including the free shuttle to the San Manuel Casino. Each San Bernardino Line Metrolink train arriving at the San Bernardino Station between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. Monday through Friday is met by a shuttle bus direct to the casino, which also provides nonstop afternoon returns linking to San Bernardino train departures.

The shuttle bus service proved to be so popular following its November 1 launch, that it had to be temporarily put on hold to improve passenger safety. Crowds of casino-goers piled off the train trying to get a seat on one overcrowded bus. Since then, new agreements have been put in place with the shuttle operator to provide multiple buses at key times.

Amenities for Passengers

Thus, Metrolink recognizes that it is important to continue to create incentives for people to take the train. One of the most powerful incentives is to increase parking at stations. Tustin, for example, increased its supply of parking, which led to increased ridership. Metrolink is also proceeding on other expansion and current traffic needs. Notably, New Jersey Transit leased several of its cars to Metrolink in 2007, when Metrolink’s capacity was strained to bursting. However, Metrolink hopes to cut expenses by ending the NJT leases by purchasing the cars and possibly reselling them.

Metrolink also has been active in rebuilding its first-generation Bombardier fleet, including an effort to repurpose some to expand bicycle capacity.

Guardian Fleet Expansion

When the OCTA Board voted in 2005 to increase commuter rail service in the county through its Metrolink Service Expansion Program, OCTA committed $137 million to purchase 59 Rotem rail cars to support existing and expanded service.

Since then, however, OCTA has scaled back its expansion efforts due to reduced availability of operating funds. Under current expansion plans, OCTA will need only 37 of the cars. This leaves 22 cars OCTA bought that are instead used throughout the entire 512-mile system.

Metrolink and member agencies have expressed their desire to keep the 22 cars for use on the rest of the system for expansion or current traffic needs. Accordingly, Metrolink drafted a memorandum of understanding with OCTA that would allow the other member agencies to reimburse OCTA for the 22 cars. The reimbursements would include either direct cash or payments to support operations or capital projects that OCTA would have underwritten.

The 22 cars will be paid for by all agencies in the following formula which appears to approximate current network train-miles: Los Angeles County Metro, 47.5%; OCTA, 18.1%; Riverside County Transportation Commission, 11.1%; San Bernardino Association of Governments, 14.4%; and Ventura County Transportation Commission, 7.2%.

Other agencies besides OCTA have contributed additional Rotem cars. This contribution is recognized and credited towards the funding agency so that service expansion and future rehab costs are equitably distributed among Metrolink’s constituent agencies.

Route Upgrades and Extensions

Metrolink plans to launch the Perris Valley Line in 2013 primarily through contributions of the Riverside County Transportation Commission, which contributed funds to purchase 10 cars and 2 locomotives for the service.

Metrolink is also proceeding on other capital and expansion projects. Metrolink, working with San Bernardino County, will install a new terminal on E Street in San Bernardino while also rebuilding its San Bernardino yard.

Also, the 24-mile Perris Valley Line, to operate as an extension of the existing 91 Line, is on its way, despite legal entanglements. Notably, the line will have a 2 percent grade, 10-degree curves, and freight trains that will share the track.

Crew Use Efficiencies

One way Metrolink is trying to be more efficient is by possibly adopting more straight time crews. Currently, Metrolink utilizes split crews that serve 12 hours end-to-end, with 4 hours of paid rest and hotel time. Straight crews, on the other hand, come on duty for 12 hours with no hotel time. Currently, Metrolink plans to launch the Perris Valley Line in 2013 primarily through contributions of the Riverside County Transportation Commission, which contributed funds to purchase 10 cars and 2 locomotives for the service.

Some observers have raised the question of whether Metrolink could use more straight crews to reduce operations costs. For example, in the case of the Ventura County Line, one could theoretically run eight crews instead of five if straight crews were employed.

However, the savings these changes would bring would be offset by other costs of running more trains. Ultimately, the member agencies are given an opportunity to decide whether to expand service and chip in for the additional costs.

Thanks to Dennis Marzec of Metrolink and Numan Parada of The Transit Coalition for items in the above report.

Photos provided courtesy of Chris Guenzler and trainweb.org

California Rail News September-December 2011
SACRAMENTO PASSENGERS TO BE STRANDED

Opinion by Wilhelm R. Reich

Sacramento’s station has been the most popular Amtrak stop in Northern California because of its passenger amenities, covered platforms, close light rail connections and easy pedestrian access to downtown business destinations. That’s soon to be history. A long-delayed City of Sacramento project that has consumed hundreds of millions of public dollars is about to destroy all the progress made in the past two decades.

Beginning as soon as February, all passengers will be forced to take a quarter-mile trek from the ticket window into a lonely tunnel through the toxic Sacramento Railyards site before they can board Capitol Corridor, San Joaquin, Amtrak trains. Regional Transit will stay put for now, 650 feet from the remote Amtrak platform.

Phase I of the Sacramento Intermodal Facility project moves Amtrak passenger platforms about 1,200 feet north of the waiting room to accommodate real estate speculators to the detriment of Amtrak and light rail passengers. New remote platforms will lack basic amenities like heating or air conditioning, enough shelter for passengers to be protected from sun or rain, bathrooms, ticket machines or security.

But, it does not end there: Development pressure and a starry-eyed City of Sacramento staff are ready to roll out a new sports facility (aka, Entertainment Sports Complex or ESC), estimated to cost on $675,000 square feet directly blocking passenger access between the current station waiting room. However, removing tracks and platforms to a remote site 1,200 feet away undermines the entire purpose of the improvements to date.

The City of Sacramento, regarding Phase I, cynically claims that the Sacramento Intermodal Facility will create “a state of the art regional transportation center.” State-of-the-art is a term which glibly masks the discomfort and inconvenience planned for nearly 25,000 people per week.

The project was subject to environmental review and was approved by the Sacramento City Council through a Finding of No Significant Impact. The project is folded into the grandiose Sacramento Railyards Specific Plan dated December, 2007. However, the City is rashly making changes in its developer-friendly 2007 specific plan (which passed environmental review) to promote the sports complex, a move which may undermine existing environmental clearances.

At the October 12, 2011 “public meeting” to roll out the stadium plan and to start the environmental process (Environmental Impact Report (EIR) Notice of Preparation (NOP)), city staff breathlessly described conceptual plans which depict the ESC. The posters and fanciful renderings show a massive, scale-hostile ESC squatting between the current station waiting room and the relocated tracks to the north, and 1-5 to the west. As depicted by the city staff, the ESC will create a significant impediment to passenger access to the platforms and will make a convoluted gauntlet for passengers to navigate as they wheel their suitcases, baby carriages, and other gear.

Before the sports complex, the ordeal was already a walk of at least 7 to 10 minutes from the ticket window to the remote platforms. Any additional circuity or complexity for passengers easily could make the trip a 10 to 15 minute slog. How much mistreatment will Amtrak riders take before they go back to driving?

The sports complex is locally controversial because funding for it would require hundreds of millions of dollars in city money at the same time Sacramento faces police department reductions, neighborhood pool closures, and severely diminished municipal services. However, when queried about ESC funding, city staff at the October event optimistically predicted that funding would not impact city budgets.

One must also wonder what scheme is at hand to finance the sports complex, what with the current problems faced by the Sacramento Kings and other NBA teams.

At press time, the City Council seems ready to hand sports developers additional hundreds of millions by auctioning off city parking garages, just as the state announces new cutbacks in school and health funding. It is a sad state of affairs that the Council is ready to underwrite salary increases for basketball players at the same time it is cutting City staff and services.

The current platform plan and the potential arena plan both ignore the wellbeing of the growing number of train users at Sacramento station and the economic benefits of a station location that up until now has produced the highest traffic in Northern California.

The ultimate consequence of the Phase I expansion and the ESC completion will make Sacramento hellish for rail passengers. Sacramento’s gateway will become a concrete matrix dominated by out-of-scale projects. Amtrak and the Capitol Corridor administrative authority are loudly absent.

Consequently, it is up to passengers to challenge this project, including the EIR process and financing issues. Otherwise, Sacramento will become one of the most rail-hostile cities in the United States (that’s saying something when you consider the Amtrak stations in Salt Lake City or Buffalo).
Attendees at the CalRail 2020 conference in November enjoyed a full presentation on Metro Rail projects and their sequence of construction up to 2035, but attention was most focused on the Expo Line, where excitement was building that the first segment would open soon.

As it turned out, the route had to be seen by bus because the line wasn’t even handed over from construction contractors to Metro until three weeks after the conference, and testing was only being conducted on weekdays.

Observers who got a chance to ride a test train in early December pointed out that there were major pieces of work remaining, such as on the switch at the junction of the Expo Line and the Blue Line and ventilation for the tunnel under Figueroa near USC. Likewise, the Culver City station, which was rebid after the first contractor abandoned the job, apparently has months of work remaining before it could open.

On youtube.com a search for Expo Line came up with Los Angeles County Supervisor and Metro Board Member Zev Yaroslavsky making his own exploratory trip aboard a test run. Other posts including those by “ExpoLineFan” (above right) show a fascinating variety of odd tests including two trains running parallel. What fun!

According to Yaroslavsky, sometime early next year, the first Expo Line segment is expected to begin operation from the 7th Street Metro Center downtown to La Cienega and Jefferson. Expo Line supporters now say the earliest they see this happening is late February, due to the unexpected complexity of signaling problems at the junction. Alternatively, the opening could wait all the way to May-April, when the westernmost station of Phase 1, the Culver City station, is expected to be done.

Eventually, Expo Phase 2 will extend to 4th Street and Colorado Avenue in Santa Monica. When it’s complete, the 15.2-mile line will be the first mass transit rail project on the West Side since Red Car service ceased in the 1950’s.

Yaroslavsky predicted in his video that Angelenos would “vote with their feet” and that the line would prove highly popular.

CRF is actively providing leadership on reforming the project, and promoting cost savings that could be achieved by involving private capital in project design. Your generous contribution today to CRF will help us stop the bad plan and launch an environmentally superior alternative.

More media outlets are speaking out about HSRA’s corrupt practices such as using public relations firms to lobby legislators and such as targeting friendly legislators’ districts with unproductive facilities like elevated tracks and mid-route maintenance facilities.

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We are a tax-deductible 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and operate without paid officers or permanent employees, so all financial resources are directed to our mission of cost-effective modern rail service. Take a tax deduction by using the form at left to send a check to CRF or by using the PayPal link on our web site.