

Boondoggle express

Contra Costa Times Editorial

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CALIFORNIA FACES A huge budget shortfall, a weakening economy, a home foreclosure mess, a drought and the need to expand its reservoir system. Tax increases loom even as businesses are down-sizing and inflation threatens a comeback.

Amid all these challenges, California voters will be asked to approve \$10 billion in bonds in November to open the way for the Boondoggle Express. It's a high-speed, high-hopes rail line from San Francisco to Los Angeles that is short on planning and long on fantasy.

Of course, \$10 billion is only the beginning. Another \$23 billion will be sought from a deficit-ridden federal government and private investors wary of a recession. The cost of the high-speed train is estimated at \$33 billion for the main line, with an additional \$7 billion for spur lines to Sacramento and San Diego.

Does anyone who has followed the saga of the Bay Bridge debacle really believe the high-speed rail system will cost less than \$60 billion, \$80 billion?

But even at \$40 billion, this is a boondoggle that would dwarf the Big Dig in Boston and the Bay Bridge fleecing combined.

The fantasy of duplicating a 200-plus mph rail system like the one in Japan or France through the Central Valley has been around for awhile. But soon voters will be asked to approve real money to fulfill it.

One might think by now that the high-speed rail plans for construction, operation and investment have been worked out in great detail with considerable confidence in their success. Even after spending \$58 million over a decade in planning, that is decidedly not the case.

A week ago, a California Senate panel blew what should be a warning whistle for voters. Its report questions the financial assumptions made by the California High-Speed Rail Authority and urges significant changes to its plan to develop a 700-mile bullet train system.

"Neither the authority's 2000 business plan nor any of the agency's subsequent documents discuss the risks that might be associated with the project," charges the 27-page report by the Senate Transportation and Housing Committee.

The report says the rail authority needs to demonstrate greater financial transparency and accountability. In addition, the report urges CHSRA to present an updated business plan prior to the November election so that voters are fully aware of financial risks before they vote on the \$10 billion bond measure.

These risks go to the heart of the system, including construction cost increases, less-than expected ridership or revenue, difficulty attracting private financial backers or acquiring land and the possibility that the state might have to subsidize the service.

If the Senate panel that studied the high-speed rail system is uncertain of its costs, investors, federal aid and income, certainly voters should be.

We have long been wary of high-speed rail in California. It would make more sense in a more densely populated area like the Boston-to-Washington, D.C., corridor than in California.

Besides, this state has a poor record of completing huge construction projects anywhere near budget or estimated date of completion.

We also have no confidence in claims that the train could carry passengers at a lower price than the airlines without subsidies, nor nearly as quickly. Then there is the major problem with the route, which serves the 1.3 million people in San Francisco and the Peninsula far better than the 2.5 million residents of the East Bay.

Adding to the uncertainty about the bullet train project is Union Pacific Railroad's unwillingness to sell its right of way for high-speed rail routes. That could delay construction and be a major financial setback.

This report is a loud and clear warning to all California voters not to be too eager to get aboard the Boondoggle Express.

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