

L.A. senator clarifies Valley 'tumbleweeds' comments on high-speed rail

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By Tim Sheehan

Sen. Kevin DeLeón, the soon-to-be leader of the California Senate, raised eyebrows throughout the San Joaquin Valley recently with disparaging-sounding remarks about the state's controversial high-speed rail project.

In the June 21 piece by Los Angeles Times writer George Skelton ([and published Friday in The Bee](#)), DeLeón -- a Democrat from Los Angeles -- said that "it's illogical" to begin construction of the bullet-train network in the Valley because "nobody lives out there in the tumbleweeds."

"I don't think it makes sense to lay down track in the middle of nowhere," DeLeón was quoted as saying. The column added that DeLeón "supports the concept of high-speed rail, but with the caveat that track-laying begin in the Los Angeles and San Francisco areas."

Building in the urban bookends of the line would create much-needed -- and highly visible -- hard-hat jobs in those cities, DeLeón suggested. "But out in the Central Valley ... no one will see the construction jobs."

Having the project visible where public transportation is needed and wanted, like Southern California or the Bay Area, would also make high-speed rail more viable politically, DeLeón explained.

The six counties of the central and southern San Joaquin Valley, from Merced in the north to Kern in the south, are home to more than 2.8 million people. Unemployment rates across the region run from a low of 9.5% in Madera County up to 12.5% in Merced County, compared to 8.2% in Los Angeles County.

DeLeón was unavailable Wednesday to comment for this story. His staff this week clarified DeLeón's position on high-speed rail construction and offered apologies for his broad "out in the tumbleweeds" remarks.

His Valley colleagues in the Senate, meanwhile, say they're inclined to cut him some slack -- and work to make sure he understands that there is more to the region than tumbleweeds.

"Folks say stuff every once in a while they'd like to take back," said Sen. Andy Vidak, R-Hanford. "I totally understand that ... But he's going to have to get an education now, that's for sure."

Besides being perceived as dismissive of the region where the California High-Speed Rail Authority wants to build its first 130-mile section of the statewide train line, DeLeón's remarks were seemingly at odds with his vote in July 2012 to allocate nearly \$6 billion for the initial construction stages in the Valley.

That money is a combination of federal transportation and stimulus money and funds from Proposition 1A, a high-speed rail bond measure approved by voters in 2008.

This week, DeLeón's staff said the senator -- who in October will ascend to the Senate's top leadership post of president pro tempore -- didn't mean to step on the Valley's toes with his "tumbleweeds" remark, nor did he intend to suggest that construction of the rail system be derailed in the Valley in favor of starting somewhere else.

"I know he's sorry it came out that way and didn't intend to insult the Valley," Dan Reeves, DeLeón's chief of staff, wrote in an email response to inquiries from The Bee.

Cap-and-trade context

Reeves said Wednesday that the Times interview was about the use of cap-and-trade money from California's greenhouse-gas reduction program for high-speed rail, and not the 2012 appropriation from federal funds and Proposition 1A, a \$9.9 billion bond measure approved by voters in 2008.

"The senator supports the bond funds and federal dollars being used for the Central Valley work," Reeves said. But DeLeón is skeptical "about using ... cap-and-trade funds that are legally required to reduce greenhouse gas emissions" for high-speed rail in the Valley.

"His concerns ... stem from the fact that environmental benefits of laying track between Fresno and Bakersfield are so far off in the future that using cap-and-trade funds would put those funds at risk of being invalidated by the courts," Reeves said. "He also frankly thought it was inappropriate to sweep a large percentage of the cap-and-trade fund for anything that didn't provide immediate reduction" of smog and greenhouse gases.

DeLeón was among the majority in the Senate who approved a 2014-15 state budget deal that ultimately allocated \$250 million from the cap-and-trade fund -- money generated by auctioning pollution credits to companies that are unable to reduce their own emissions -- for high-speed rail and set aside 25% of cap-and-trade revenue in future to the project. Reeves said DeLeón "was willing to support those funds" for the bullet train "so long as those investments provide verifiable GHG (greenhouse gas) reductions in the short-term."

Those reductions, he added, are best achieved "by investing in mass transit infrastructure in high-density areas, thereby accomplishing our GHG goals in a more cost-effective and efficient manner."

Additionally, Reeves said, DeLeón "was making a larger political point about the need to deliver tangible benefits in 'voter-rich' areas in the near future" to bolster public and political support that has soured since Prop. 1A was passed in 2008.

A learning curve

Vidak and fellow Republican Sen. Tom Berryhill, whose district includes portions of Madera and Fresno where construction may begin this summer, said the Los Angeles senator's remarks reflect a dismissive attitude among urban legislators toward the rural center of the state. It fuels concerns about the Valley being overlooked for state investments in infrastructure and other needs.

"There is definitely a disconnect in Sacramento when it comes to the Valley," Vidak said. "Those folks are so far removed from where their food and energy comes from. The Valley is a dynamic powerhouse for the rest of the state, whether we're feeding the state and the rest of the country or providing 75% of the domestic oil in California."

While Vidak opposes the California High-Speed Rail Authority's efforts in the Valley, he is concerned about other needs in the region. "We're talking about water bonds, we're talking about infrastructure, we're talking about repairing Highway 99," he said. "Those are all important, and those put people to work."

Vidak added that he "just sent a letter off to Kevin inviting him to come to the Central Valley, and I'd love to show him all the great things here. It's not tumbleweeds. We're citrus and vineyards and the food basket of the world."

But both Vidak and Berryhill believe DeLeón meant no slight to the region with his "tumbleweed" remarks.

"He cares a lot about his district, and that's why he's talking about taking high-speed rail down there," Vidak said. "I don't think he said it with any malice. ... But being the future pro tem, he's going to have to learn about these other districts."

Berryhill concurred. "This is a new position for Kevin DeLeón," he said. "He has to understand that he's going to be representing the whole state, not just his district. It's a little bit of a learning curve."

"If I had a nickel for every time I stepped in it, I'd be a wealthy man," Berryhill added.

Berryhill said he worked closely with DeLeón on a number of issues when both were in the state Assembly, including inviting DeLeón to his district and gaining his support for \$3.2 million for a community park. After the "tumbleweeds" comment was published in the Times, "Kevin came up to me on the Senate floor and backtracked a little bit," Berryhill said.

Vidak said DeLeón might have a different opinion if he succeeded in ramping up high-speed rail construction in Los Angeles.

"I think if they did actually move the surveyors and construction and the legal teams down there, he'd see what a lot of us see in the Valley, that it's not so cool and it's mismanaged," Vidak said. "It's not what we voted on, and most of the state is against it. People have changed their minds."

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