

# James Fallows: California's High Speed Rail Plan Is 'Better Than The Alternatives'

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The Atlantic's [James Fallows](#) says California's high speed rail project may be flawed and expensive, but he also calls it better than other methods of accommodating the state's growing population.



*Fallows: "If California does not do this and there are another 10 or 15 million people there over the next generation, the other ways of dealing with the transportation problem, whether it's more roads or just the cost of congestion or more airports or whatever, will be more destructive as far as I can tell than going ahead with the rail project."*

The journalist and author was a guest on Valley Public Radio's Valley Edition on Tuesday, and [compared the rail project to other infrastructure investments](#) that were highly controversial in their own eras, like the Transcontinental Railroad and the Golden Gate Bridge.

Fallows is currently writing about the planned bullet train as part of his American Future project. He's penned several articles about the rail line, including [looking at the project's flaws](#), and a [point-by-point examination](#) of arguments for an against the train.

Fallows says despite its scale, the project has received relatively little national media coverage.

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He also contends that while much attention has been given to the negative aspects of the project, in other major infrastructure investments, they can also have unforeseen benefits.

*"Usually these things end up having benefits, more benefits that aren't foreseen than drawbacks that aren't foreseen. The dynamic effects of railroads or airports or the Golden Gate Bridge or Louisiana. I think it's easier to foresee in the here and now and the inconveniences they cause, than to imagine 20 or 50 or 100 years from now, the sorts of dynamic effects they have."*

TRANSCRIPT:

**Q: Your American Futures project has taken you to just about every corner of the country, now you're writing about high speed rail, and visiting the valley. Why write about this project, and why do you think this is important to a national audience?**

A: I think it's important for a national audience because there is an imbalance in east-west coverage. I'm originally from Southern California. I grew up in Redlands which is out near San Bernardino and the Inland Empire, and one of the struggles of my life has been recognizing the national media in which I work are based on the east coast. But our most populous state, our most economically productive state gets under-covered in national coverage. So I thought if the high speed rail debate were happening on the east coast corridor between say Atlanta and [Washington] D.C. or something, it would be dominant news. It's a very important project whether or not you support it, and I do on balance support it. I think it's one of great consequence and deserves more attention than it's gotten outside the state.

**Q: You've compared it to Transcontinental Railroad and the Erie Canal in terms of its potential significance. I was reading Steven Ambrose's wonderful book "Nothing Like It In the World" about the building of the transcontinental railroad. That too was a project that faced huge cost overruns, corruption, scandals, mismanagement, political intrigue; how do you think it [high speed rail] compares to those big projects?**

A: There are two important realities about any big infrastructure project, even casting that as broadly as the Louisiana Purchase or the Alaska Purchase in the 1800's, which really made America. Certainly the Transcontinental Railroad, the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge, basically any large measure that any democracy has undertaken, two things have been true. One is that these have always been controversial. Even the Louisiana Purchase believe it or not was bitterly criticized at the time. Because anything large involves trade-offs and imperfections and anything involving construction, there's a possibility for leakage. The other thing that I assert to be true is that usually these things end up having benefits, more benefits that aren't foreseen than drawbacks that aren't foreseen. The dynamic effects of railroads or airports or the Golden Gate Bridge or Louisiana. I think it's easier to foresee in the here and now and the inconveniences they cause, than to imagine 20 or 50 or 100 years from now, the sorts of dynamic effects they have. So I in general have a bias in favor of these projects because to me the historical record suggests that we over-emphasize their drawbacks and under-imagine their benefits.

**Q: You write that you came into this project generally in support of high speed rail – and after studying the issue, talking to a lot of people and reading a lot of reports on the project, you actually say you're now more in support of the project.**

A: Yes, and so I'll explain first my starting point and then my evolution. I've spent a lot of my life reporting from outside the United States. I lived in China for a long time, and Japan and other parts of Africa and Europe. And there you see the transforming effect of some of these big projects. You wouldn't want to make these decisions the way the Chinese do, just bulldozing people out of the way literally, and all the rest. But you can see the difference that this good infrastructure makes. And then if you've been in a place where high speed rail works, it just is a whole different experience. So I was predisposed to think that if there's a way this can work for California that's worth looking for.

Now I don't present myself as being an original expert on this. I'm still in the process of interviewing people. But it seems to me the most powerful argument is the dynamic one. That if California does not do this and there are another 10 or 15 million people there over the next generation, the other ways of dealing with the transportation problem, whether it's more roads or just the cost of congestion or more airports or whatever, will be more destructive as far as I can tell than going ahead with the rail project.

**Q: The challenges of this project have been very well documented throughout the media on our station and beyond: cost overruns, a business plan that has been revised and revised again, construction delays, legal challenges. One of your critics said something to the effect that if the people at the rail authority wanted high speed rail to fail, they couldn't be doing a better job – can something like this survive what appears to be at best a poorly executed roll out?**

A: I guess we'll see. That's up to the people of my original home state your current home state. I thought it was interesting as I posted that criticism and also the response from Dan Richard, who of course is now head of the high speed rail authority who made two points. One, he admitted that there had been lots of problems that the correspondent was mentioning but he said that with Governor Brown taking it more seriously than his predecessors had, Dan Richard asserted that it was on a different management track and had some evidence to back it up.

He also pointed out that BART itself where he was twice president of the BART board, was at least as imperiled when it was getting going now 50 years ago when it was getting going, now BART had its problems and I know this as a former rider, but if you imagine Bay Area transport without it, you have a more depressing prospect. So I can't predict the political reality how this is going to go, my judgment as a political observer is that I hope it goes forward just as a past and I hope future resident of California, I think it will be better for the state than the alternatives.

**Q: A lot of the most strident opposition to this project comes from local farmers and dairymen, who say the rail line is going to destroy their business by slicing their properties in half. They say this project will destroy their way of life. Yet you point to some research that you say shows high speed rail, if done correctly could actually save farms and farmland. Can you explain what you mean by that?**

A: Yes, and again in my role as reporter rather than original expert here. By talking to people at UC Davis, where a lot of this research has been going on. They've been saying that obviously we know that over the last century, and over the last generation, farmland in the Central Valley and elsewhere has been chewed up at a ferocious rate. People around Fresno know that as well as anyone else in the state. In my hometown of Redlands I've seen orange groves give way to development. That land has been chewed up not because of high speed rail which hasn't existed, but because of all the other forces we're well aware of in California's development – from suburbanization to highway development to sprawl of all kinds. The analysis of the people who seem most convincing to me make, is if we look 20 to 50 years ahead, the land that is likely to be lost in farms due to high speed rail will probably be much less than the land that would be lost without high speed rail – if there is more highway construction, if the current sprawl dynamics continue. They may be wrong in that analysis but at least they're saying on a dynamic basis that we look to the California that our children and grandchildren will know is likely to be less chewed up if this project goes ahead than otherwise.

**Q: There's also a tension here in Central California between urban and rural that we see in a lot of issues and I think we see it here as well. Opponents say they want this area to stay the same, to remain a largely agricultural area. But others say that our social problems here, the high unemployment, poverty, things like air pollution – all these problems make staying the same unacceptable. And they cite high speed rail as a possible solution. Do you see that tension in your travels here as well?**

A: Sure and that's a tension that's certainly present in California, but it's not unique to California. This is a worldwide issue. If you travel in parts of France or Italy or even Germany, people simultaneously want to preserve those areas as having all the virtues which have made them so appealing over the centuries. And yet how are people going to have jobs there, how are the schools going to be financed? The same thing is happening even in China where I've been living where parts of rural China don't want to be paved over the

way Beijing and Shanghai are. But they also want to have some of the benefits of prosperity. So this is the California instance of a worldwide tension and something for which no one has an actual clear balance.

I think the California message over the decades has been situations or circumstances have allowed the entire state's economy to develop, in its education aspects, its hi-tech aspects and its agricultural business and all the rest and try to preserve the circumstances that make each of them special will provide the rising tide for the state as a whole. The people in the Central Valley will probably, will be better off if the state as a whole becomes more prosperous, more money for schools and anti-pollution etcetera. The question becomes what's the way to best manage this very, very complex equation. I think further freeways through the valley and further sprawl in the valley are probably the worst answer to that. The question is what are better answers than that?

**Q: Some people talk about California and say the state has been in decline for some time now. It used to be in the 50's, 60's and early 70's, the state was known for thinking big and for big projects. Not just for the aerospace industry and Hollywood, but the water projects, the CSU and UC systems, the freeway systems. It's been a while since California undertook anything even remotely close to the scale of high speed rail. That was before we had the state's landmark environmental law. Can California still think this big on this grand of a scale.**

A: One reason I'm proud to be originally a California and still think of myself that way is that California is the distillation of the American experience but in a way people don't usually think. We usually think the styles start there or music, or clothes or tech. But I think it's actually the paradox of modern America. The paradox of modern America is we have in my view, by far the most creative economy on earth, by far the most new opportunities for people, immigrants come from all over the place. And the problem we have is on public issues, public governance. Being able to resolve disagreements and invest in anything that requires a public presence. California has had the same situation over the last generation plus. When I was a kid in Redlands schools in the 60's they were very well funded, that's less the case now. California is privately still enormously powerful – the tech industry the entertainment industry, the agricultural industry. The public realm has been the one with the challenges and I actually think that it's good that Jerry Brown in his second incarnation has been pushing rail as a big public thing that would have benefits for the state in the long run, but that's my personal view.

**Q: You've been traveling throughout California and the Central Valley as well. You were here in Fresno a couple of months ago and talking to folks at a restaurant downtown, trying to get a feel for the community. What surprised you? What didn't you expect to find in your travels in Central California?**

A: Well I'm about to start writing a series of articles about a place called Winters up near Davis, which is a walnut and almond community and the way they're trying to deal with environmental circumstances. I guess in the time since I was living in California, I am newly impressed in the wealth and poverty contrast between coastal California and valley California. And I think that that is something which I had known in concept, but hadn't sort of reabsorbed in real experience until driving up and down the valley recently. So my wife and I will be out there again soon. We're going to come back to Fresno. We were only there for a day plus before. So we'll be back there for a number of days to you and try to learn about your particular city which is interesting to us.