

# An upside of high-speed rail? It's more traveler friendly than flying

Dec 20,  
2014

In the holiday spirit, here's something cheerful to say about the California bullet train if Gov. Jerry Brown ever gets it assembled:

It would be a whole lot more passenger-friendly than demeaning air travel.

No torturous, long security lines. No stripping off your belts and shoes. No pat-downs or X-rays. No inhuman stares. No re-dressing.

Instead, Welcome Aboard.

Use the tray table anytime. No need for a seatbelt. Recline and relax.

Granted, there is still a caboose load of questions about this \$68-billion project, which is projected to cost double what voters were promised back in 2008 when they approved \$9 billion in bonds to help build a 500-mile high-speed rail line between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

[California selects contractors for next phase of bullet train route](#)

With the escalated cost, is it really worth it? This would be by far the most expensive state public works project ever. Is this the top spending priority for a state that has hundreds of billions of dollars in infrastructure needs — not only for commuter rail, transit and highways, but waterworks?

Universities have been shortchanged while students have shouldered higher tuition. Courtrooms have been shuttered for lack of money.

But most of all, even if it were a sound investment, where would the state get all those dollars to build a bullet train? No state anywhere ever has. It's a job for nations that can print money and private financiers who envision an ultimate profit.

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So far, the federal government has kicked in only \$3.3 billion, and Congress is vowing no more. Investors have not put up a dime.

The money situation is starting to look less gloomy, but more about that later.

First, a recent comment by Jeff Morales, chief executive officer of the California High-Speed Rail Authority, caught my attention. He said: "I guarantee that you can keep your shoes on."

Morales was on a panel about the future and asserted that there'll be a lot less security harassment in train depots than at airports because there's not the compelling need.

"For one thing, you can't take a train anywhere but on a track."

Instinctively we all know that to be true, but spoken aloud, it had a soothing sound.

Later I called him.

You can't drive a train off a track into a building. It just is not as attractive a target for terrorists as airplanes. - California High-Speed Rail Authority CEO Jeff Morales, on why security will be lighter for train passengers than air travelers

"There are fundamental differences between a train and an airplane," Morales reminded. "You can't drive a train off a track into a building. It just is not as attractive a target for terrorists as airplanes."

Morales said that behind the scenes, the high-speed rail agency has been conferring with the California Highway Patrol and local law enforcement about passenger protection.

He envisions cops eyeballing passengers, but not screening them. There'll be security cameras, but no intrusive metal detectors. That could save travelers, say, a good half hour.

Get to the airport 15 minutes before departure and you've lost your seat. But get to the train depot 15 minutes ahead and walk aboard.

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A flight from Los Angeles to San Francisco, on paper, may take an hour-plus. But add to that driving way out to the airport, parking and running up the blood pressure while packed into a security line, and it's a three-hour-plus trip. The train trip is designed for two hours, 40 minutes. But the depot is downtown, and there's no security line.

Morales referred me to a security expert, Brian Jenkins, a senior adviser at RAND Corp. and an analyst at the Mineta Transportation Institute. He has written a lot about terrorist threats.

The only place in the world where high-speed rail passengers are screened is for the Eurostar that tunnels beneath the English Channel between London, Paris and Brussels, Jenkins says. That's because when the tunnel was built, the British were threatened by Irish Republican Army terrorists, he says, and recently they've been concerned about illegal immigration.

On all other high-speed lines, he says, there's no screening even of luggage, except occasionally when there are random checks of riders and their bags during high terrorism alerts.

"Terrorists remain obsessed with bringing down airlines," Jenkins says. "A bomb in an airplane can bring it down, killing everyone on the plane and where it lands. A bomb in a train station or even on a train can do no greater damage than at a crowded shopping mall or movie theater."

He adds: "And last time I looked, these things run on rails. A terrorist can't exactly hold a gun to the engineer's head and say, 'Take me to Syria.'"

OK, I'm definitely sold on the convenience and comfort.

But like many, I chortle at the route — Madera to Bakersfield for the initial leg. Construction has already started on that lightly populated stretch. Brown is trying to get far enough down the track to discourage any turning back by his eventual successor.

The financing is starting to look conceivable.

The train was jump-started this year when the Legislature agreed to Brown's request for \$650 million in cap-and-trade greenhouse emission fees.

Even more important, the lawmakers allocated 25% of future cap-and-trade revenue to the project. That could mean between \$500 million and \$1 billion-plus annually for construction. That is attracting private interest, Morales says.

"We're having serious discussions" with investors, he asserts.

OK, show us the money when it gets here.

Meanwhile, the bullet train may still be a fantasy. But at least it's a pleasant dream — not a nightmare like air travel.

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