

California bullet train getting on track

By Jessica Calefati

jcalefati@bayareanewsgroup.com

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This is an artist's rendering of a proposed high-speed rail train passing through Sacramento. Courtesy of California High Speed Rail Authority. (California High Speed Rail Autho)

SACRAMENTO -- After a decade of controversy and skepticism that threatened to derail California's bullet train, the state is finally ready to break ground on the San Francisco-to-Los Angeles rail line.

The ceremony scheduled Tuesday in Fresno will be largely symbolic, since planning and demolition for a 130-mile stretch of track in the Central Valley began several months ago, but one thing is certain: Once construction begins, the \$68 billion bullet train will begin steaming ahead.

"Before, you never knew if and when the project would really get going," said Larry Gerston, a political expert at San Jose State University. "Now, as those tracks get laid, mile by mile, it gets harder and harder to turn back the idea."

Politicians wearing hard hats and carrying shovels will emphasize their determination to get the train rolling when they gather this week in Fresno at the site of a future high-speed rail station for a ceremony skeptics said would never take place.

Some say the pomp and circumstance legitimizes the project and signals the state's commitment to complete it. Others view the groundbreaking as a bluff meant to distract the public from the hurdles ahead.

"It's called a groundbreaking, but I wouldn't call it very 'groundbreaking,'" said Stuart Flashman, an Oakland attorney for opponents who are trying to kill the project in court.

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Indeed, several lawsuits linger, it remains uncertain where the state will find tens of billions of dollars needed to build the rail line, and Republicans in Congress say they won't give the bullet train another federal dime.

But the train's darkest days are behind it, the project's top overseer says.

"The last three years have been a bridge connecting the concept of high-speed rail in California to the reality that we're building high-speed rail for the people of California," said Dan Richard, chairman of the High-Speed Rail Authority board.

Over the past six months, the authority scored a major legal victory that will allow the state to sell more than \$8 billion in bonds and won its first steady stream of state funding from a program that collects fees from California's worst polluters.

Gov. Jerry Brown, the bullet train's biggest backer, won re-election in November and is expected to tout the project in the inaugural address he delivers Monday.

Heavy construction on a 29-mile stretch of track between Avenue 17 in Madera and East American Avenue in Fresno will ramp up soon after the groundbreaking. Next, the authority plans to lay 60 miles of track between Fresno and the Tulare-Kern County line and 40 miles between the county line and Standard Road north of Bakersfield.

Progress on the demolition of the old Del Monte building in downtown Fresno on Nov. 14, 2014. The building is being cleared in preparation for construction of the future Fresno high-speed rail station. Demolition work was done by J. Kroeker, Inc. a woman-owned certified Small Business Enterprise based out of Fresno. Courtesy of California High-Speed Rail Authority (HSR)

Those segments and stations in Merced, Fresno, Hanford and Bakersfield are to be completed by 2018 at a cost of roughly \$13.8 billion, according to an authority report. Service on the Merced to Bakersfield segment would begin soon after. The agency also hopes to speed up construction of a Burbank-to-Palmdale link.

Bullet train gathers steam

State leaders will gather Tuesday in Fresno to break ground for the \$68 billion high-speed bullet train. Construction is planned in stages for a line that by 2029 is expected to carry riders from San Francisco to Los Angeles in three hours.

Segment	Cost	Completion
Merced to Fresno	\$6 billion	2018
Fresno to Bakersfield	\$7.8 billion	2018
Bakersfield to Palmdale	\$9.4 billion	2021
Palmdale to Burbank	\$8.3 billion*	2022
San Jose to Merced	\$19 billion	2026
San Francisco to San Jose	\$8 billion	2028
Burbank to Los Angeles	\$8.3 billion*	**
Los Angeles to Anaheim	\$825 million	**



"Starting in January and over the next four years, you're going to see continuous construction activity in the Central Valley," Richard said. "We're a year away from really being at the peak."

The promise of jobs may add to the project's momentum. The rail agency says it had 632 full-time equivalent jobs in planning, demolition and other preconstruction work by the third quarter of 2014. Once construction of the rail line is in full swing, the authority estimates creating as many as 20,000 jobs annually.

Work continues on the Transbay Transit Center in downtown San Francisco, Calif., Wednesday afternoon, Dec. 31, 2014. The Transbay Transit Center will be a major hub in future high-speed rail service. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group) (Karl Mondon)

But an ardent foe says all the predictions are mirages. The state will never raise the money it needs to complete construction, and it will not create as many jobs as it claims, says Quentin Kopp, a former chairman of the High Speed Rail board. The groundbreaking ceremony? "Pure propaganda," he said.

"I don't understand how they can get away with this charade with a straight face and get media attention for it," said Kopp, a former state senator. "This is Gov. Brown re-enacting his days as a cheerleader at St. Ignatius High School in San Francisco."

Holding a groundbreaking ceremony when the authority only has a fraction of the money it needs to complete the rail line is irresponsible, Kopp said. Currently, the authority has access to \$9 billion in state bonds, \$3.3 billion from the Federal Railroad Administration and \$250 million in fees collected under the state's "cap and trade" law.

It's difficult to predict how much state funding will grow as California's cap-and-trade program kicks into gear, but some economists say the project will get another \$4 billion through 2020, and the Legislative Analyst's Office forecasts revenue could climb close to \$2 billion annually.

The roughly \$12.6 billion the authority has now is a far cry from the \$67.6 billion it says it needs to complete the line, but Richard says he's not worrying. Crucial private investment will come in due time, he said.

"We're counting on the private sector to provide about a third of the money needed to complete the system," Richard said, meaning the state expects investors to pump more than \$22 billion into the project.

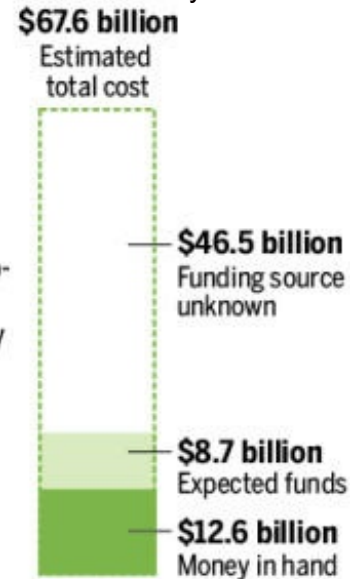
The exact costs and construction timelines of large public works projects are commonly murky. Anyone who has ever hired a contractor to work on a house can tell you the same thing, said Jack Pitney, a political expert at Claremont McKenna College.

But that doesn't mean it's a good idea to hold a groundbreaking ceremony for a project that's only partially paid for.

"Supporters of high-speed rail should be happy it's gotten this far," Pitney said. "But the project is about to enter

Where is the money going to come from?

The San Francisco-to-Los Angeles bullet train will cost roughly \$67.6 billion to build over the next two decades. The High-Speed Rail Authority has just a fraction of that sum.



Source: California High-Speed Rail Authority

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a tunnel of uncertainty, and we don't know what's on the other side."

Contact Jessica Calefati at 916-441-2101. Follow her at [Twitter.com/calefati](https://twitter.com/calefati). Read the Political Blotter at IBAbuzz.com/politics.

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