

Opinion: Bullet train pep rally and reality

By Dan Walters

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It was billed as a “groundbreaking,” but no ground was broken, even metaphorically.

Rather, what happened on a dusty lot in downtown Fresno on Tuesday was more of a pep rally during which Gov. Jerry Brown and other advocates of building a north-south bullet train system extolled its supposed virtues to a handpicked audience.

To hear Brown and other cheerleaders tell it, the project, currently priced at \$68 billion, would ease California’s worst-in-the-nation highway congestion, relieve pressure on airports, clean up the air and bring prosperity to the chronically depressed San Joaquin Valley.

“I know there are a lot of critics,” Brown said during his stream-of-conscious remarks that ranged from the medieval cathedrals of Europe to a childhood train trip and the failure of Modoc County voters – he called them “Modocians” – to support his re-election.

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But he dismissed those critics – some of whom chanted “stop the train” outside the event’s fence – as lacking spirit. “We have to build,” he said.

Do we?

A clue that the bullet train may be a solution in search of a problem lies in the seemingly strong statement by one speaker that the train will reduce automotive travel in California by 10 million vehicle-miles a day when fully operational in 2040.

The number, echoing High-Speed Rail Authority assertions, sounds impressive until one looks at it in context. California’s motorists drive nearly 1 billion miles a day, so the supposed impact – as voiced by the project’s cheerleaders – represents about a 1 percent reduction.

Nevertheless, Brown, et al., seem determined to at least begin construction soon on an initial segment in the San Joaquin Valley between Madera and Bakersfield and seem to have enough in federal grants and state bonds to do it – if they can clear away at least a dozen lawsuits that have held up sale of bonds.

However, that would just be track and a few stations, without electrification or rolling stock. And even if that segment is completed in the next five years, financing for the remainder, about \$55 billion, is nebulous.

The Legislature has allocated a large chunk of cap-and-trade fees on carbon emissions to the bullet train, probably several hundred million dollars a year. But unto itself, that revenue won’t build the system unless it’s used to service big construction loans, no more federal funds are likely, and so far, the hoped-for private or foreign government investors haven’t stepped forward.

It’s all very iffy. Brown, who declared Tuesday, “I like trains,” seems content to lay some track and build some stations during the remainder of his governorship, then leave it to others to figure out how to make it an operational statewide

system.

But in doing so, he runs the risk that it will never happen and smudge his legacy.

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