

High-speed rail needs Valley-to-L.A. link first

By Jeff Jardine
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Being a native Northern Californian, it's very tough – OK, virtually impossible – to get behind anything that benefits the southern part of the state at our expense.

They build endlessly in a desert and then scheme to get our water. They get \$1 billion to build a retaining wall along Interstate 405, and when it crumbles, they get \$100 million more to fix it. Meanwhile, we're still trying to get the North County Corridor Expressway built for \$400 million. It's an idea first broached in one form or another in 1954, the same year Willie Mays made "The Catch" at the Polo Grounds in New York.

I can't warm up to the Dodgers, Angels, Lakers, Clippers or much else about that part of the state. And while this might seem sacrilegious to some, I am totally nonplussed by Disneyland.

That stated, there are times – OK, maybe just one time – when L.A. really should take top priority.

I've written a couple of times recently about the high-speed rail project, including the potential impacts on the town of Delhi and also the display at the Capitol next week courtesy of one of the companies vying for the contract to build the trains. Sometime in 2022, high-speed rail officials promise the so-called bullet train will link Northern California with Southern California in a two-hour ride that will have your cheeks flapping behind your ears and your ears flapping behind the headrest (OK, the part about the flapping is mine, not theirs).

A couple of months ago, officials had a ceremonial groundbreaking in Fresno for the \$68 billion public-private partnership project. The first leg of construction will connect Madera and Fresno before heading south to Bakersfield and north to Merced. They claim that sometime within the next seven to eight years, the train will run from Merced to the San Fernando Valley in the L.A. basin.

Great. But why start in the Central Valley? Why not build the toughest and the most expensive stretch, from Bakersfield through the Tehachapis to L.A., first?

I posed that question to high-speed rail officials. They told me the Central Valley leg will serve as the test section for the trains. They'll be able to crank up the speed to as high as 250 mph in the flat, less populated expanses of the Southern San Joaquin Valley. They also will get more clang for the buck in the Valley, which offers lower real estate acquisition and other associated costs than other parts of the state. And they said they will concurrently build the Palmdale-to-Burbank stretch. But that still leaves no doubt the most difficult and expensive link over the mountains connecting Palmdale and Bakersfield.

Here's why they should build that one first: Right now, you can take an Amtrak train to Bakersfield. Then you have to get off the train, board a bus and ride more than two hours over the Grapevine into L.A., your estimated time of arrival at the mercy of gridlocked L.A. traffic.

Finishing the Bakersfield-to-L.A. stretch first would enable travelers to ride the length of the state down the middle, entirely on trains, with transfer points between the bullet train and Amtrak trains just minutes apart until the entire bullet train system is completed. Granted, the Amtrak trains are significantly slower than the bullet trains. The experience and efficiency of the high-speed rail leg vs. traditional train travel – experiencing the difference as passengers – would bolster demand and support for the bullet train.

But what happens if something derails the funding to complete the project? What if the political will to finish it evaporates?

Last summer, Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature dedicated 25 percent of future cap-and-trade revenue – money companies pay to offset [carbon emissions](#) – to help pay for construction. But funding also includes federal money and private investment, neither of which are a lock with Republicans now controlling the House and Senate in Washington, D.C., and outspoken bullet train opponent Jeff Denham, R-Turlock, chairing the House Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines and Hazardous Materials.

Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom has announced he will run for governor in 2018, when Brown leaves office. Newsom withdrew his support for the bullet train a year ago, saying he would “redirect” the money toward other uses. Should he win, would the political will exist to finish the high-speed rail?

Which, to me, makes it all the more important to build the leg over the Tehachapis and down to Burbank first. If they didn't get anything more done, at least we'd be able to take trains through the heart of the state into the Los Angeles basin combining the new bullet train and existing Amtrak when we go visit our water and tax dollars and to see the Giants beat L.A.

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