

# One day, we'll wonder what all the fuss about high-speed rail was about

By Bruce Maiman Special to The Bee

Financially unsound, legally dubious, an aesthetic blight, an engineering hazard – opposition to high-speed rail?

Nope. It's what critics said about the Golden Gate Bridge throughout the decade before construction began in 1933.

At its inception, BART was similarly disdained as nothing more than a corporate tool that would destroy neighborhoods.

“Historically, there's been a systematic error with big long-term infrastructure projects underestimating their benefits and overestimating their problems,” said James Fallows, the Atlantic Monthly's longtime national correspondent. The magazine is hosting a gathering in Sacramento on Wednesday night of California stakeholders to discuss the state's transportation future, with particular focus on high-speed rail.

## Related

Bruce Maiman

Fallows is uniquely suited to moderate the event, having grown up with commuter rail in Southern California and recently spending three years in China during its infrastructure boom, including an intricate high-speed rail system.

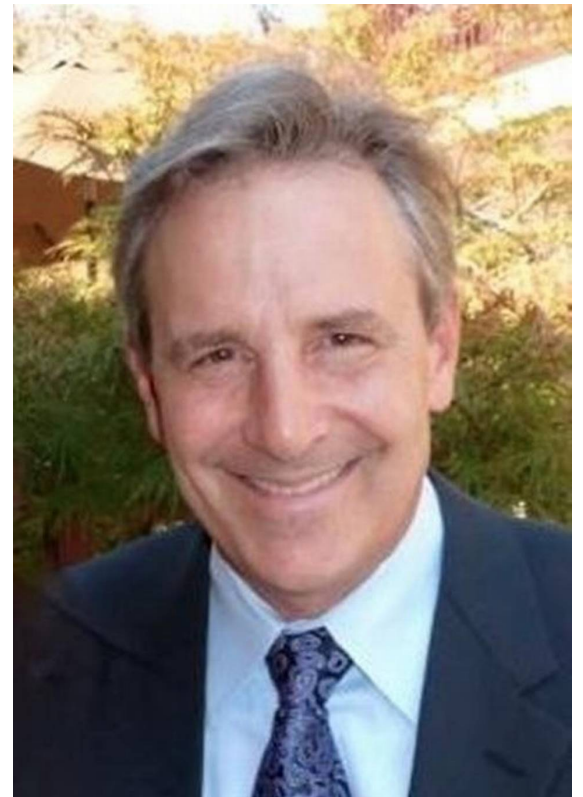
As we spoke, he rattled off numerous government ventures, all of them vigorously opposed at the time: the Louisiana and Alaska purchases, the Erie and Panama canals, the Transcontinental Railroad, the Hoover Dam, the interstate highway system.

It's difficult for us to imagine the long-term benefits of big projects during their infancy because we tend to define history through snapshots of finality, while forgetting the struggle that went into what we now see as iconic American achievements.

Arguments against rail travel have not changed much over the decades, yet when they come online we often wonder how we ever did without them. “When D.C. was building its Metro,” Fallows recalls, “people in Georgetown were very much like HSR opponents. Now, the biggest complaint about Georgetown is that it doesn't have the Metro.”

Yet, high-speed rail opposition is affecting smaller-scale commuter projects. Officials in Riverside are considering a modern streetcar line. “Opponents are already associating it with HSR, and that's hurting infrastructure investment,” said Mayor William “Rusty” Bailey.

The city's high-end estimate of \$25 million per mile would work out to \$300 million for the proposed 12-mile system, but Bailey, who also will speak at Wednesday night's summit, cites a nearby freeway-widening project 10 miles long



and costing \$1.5 billion. "That's \$150 million per mile to go from eight lanes to 12."

And by its completion, it will likely cost more than projected and already be obsolete. That's the trouble with California's arcane solution to more cars. More roads only guarantee still more cars, especially in a state whose population will swell to 60 million by 2050, most of that in the Central Valley where the first leg of high-speed rail is being built. We should offer commuters options that keep cars off the road. Nothing does that better than rail travel.

"The streetcars will offer a 4-to-1 return on economic development and property values," Bailey said. Can freeways do that?

Rail opponents typically ignore another critical cost factor. According to the Texas Transportation Institute, Sacramentans spend 32 hours a year in traffic, annually costing each motorist \$669 in lost productivity and vehicle wear and tear. Regionally, that loss totals \$834 million for commuting drivers and \$199 million for truckers. Not to mention the personal aggravation of sitting in traffic.

On a train, you can text while not driving, read, work or even nap. I know this because as a New Yorker, I grew up with trains, traveling countless miles on subways, commuter lines and Amtrak. Taking light rail here is far superior to driving downtown, despite me driving from Rocklin to do it. I bet many more would take light rail if former local leaders had been smart enough to extend it to Roseville or beyond.

To meet California's commuter needs by 2050, transportation experts say we'll need to build 3,000 more miles of freeway, costing more than \$200 billion. And you'd still be facing the rest of the century's growth.

High-speed rail seems a far better choice than the entire state ending up looking like Los Angeles.

Past opposition to what we now consider important American infrastructure projects does not prove that something unpopular is a good idea, but it does show that we're systematically biased to undervalue them, and I wouldn't be surprised at all when once high-speed rail is built, we'll marvel at it and wonder how we ever did without it.

Bruce Maiman regularly fills in as a host on KFBK radio and lives in Rocklin. Contact him at [brucemaiman@gmail.com](mailto:brucemaiman@gmail.com). Follow him on Twitter @Maimzini.