

# Steve Brandau says his freeway billboard is more pro-dam than anti-high speed rail

By John Ellis



Fresno City Council Member Steve Brandau used \$3,000 in campaign funds to buy a pro-dam, anti-bullet train billboard along Highway 99 near the Herndon Avenue exit. COURTESY STEVE BRANDAU

- 
- 
- 



The billboard's message is loud and clear — thumbs up to new dams, thumbs down to the bullet train.



Go to the [website](http://www.DamTrain.com) touted on the billboard, and it's more of the same: "Governor Brown, we need Temperance Flat Dam. We don't need a train."

The message seems to be that California's high-speed rail project is not only bad, it's stopping new dams in the state.



But Fresno City Council Member Steve Brandau, architect of the billboard and website, says that isn't the case.

"I'm not asking (Brown) to stop the train," he says. "I'm asking him to start the dam."

Brandau says all he wants Brown to do is give dams equal priority to high-speed rail. He talks of waiving California Environmental Quality Act regulations for dams and giving them fast-track authority.

“Environmentalists are solidly in charge of Sacramento,” Brandau says. “They have the money. I don’t have that, so I have to do something creative and unique.”

Political experts say Brandau’s strategy may not go very far.

“I don’t think it’s going to impact how the governor allocates his money at all,” says Fresno State political science professor Jeff Cummins. “It definitely will have no impact on what they do in Sacramento.”

But the billboard along Highway 99 at the Herndon Avenue offramp, and the accompanying website, have had at least one tangible impact: an outpouring of support for Brandau, who spent \$3,000 on the sign’s design and rent to keep it up for six weeks.

On talk radio and social media, Brandau is hailed a hero — especially from his core constituency of conservative and Tea Party Republicans. Since the billboard went up, Brandau has been in high demand. He’s been on Los Angeles-area talk radio and also on the radio program of former conservative Assembly Member Tim Donnelly. At the same time, social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have had posts praising the first-term council member.

And while Brandau says he’s not sending an anti-bullet train message, many of those cheering him are focused on it at least, if not more, than its pro-dam exhortations.

On Brandau’s Facebook page, Shaver Lake resident Tom J. DeLany wrote: “Look at the route... it’s not high speed.... and add to that, it’s a Diesel Train to start with..... No Bigger Bill of Goods has been Sold to Californians since the GOLD RUSH..... Wake UP!” (High-speed rail is actually being designed with electric trains.)

If past events are any indication, Brandau’s message might not resonate far beyond the Valley or the state’s Republican base, which essentially wields no power in Sacramento.

Sean Hannity, a conservative talk-show host for Fox News, made some waves in 2009 when he broadcast his show from a Fresno County farm, saying the region needs water.

“It’s becoming a Dust Bowl out here,” he said at the time. Hannity blamed “radical environmentalists” for cutting water pumping in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to protect fish.

Two years later, Rep. Devin Nunes aired commercials on local television hitting the state’s senior senator, Dianne Feinstein. Nunes spent around \$100,000 on a package of issue ads that criticized Feinstein for, among other things, pushing legislation to restore the San Joaquin River.

Both times the strategies played well in the Valley, but nothing happened.

Brandau says this time it is different and the reason is the drought.

Before the billboard went up, he put in a call to Brown’s office. On Thursday, one of the governor’s aides returned Brandau’s call.

In his message, Brandau told Brown he wasn’t attacking the bullet train. He was only trying to “elevate the conversation about water and what we agreed on with the water bond.”

Brandau says he was frustrated because there was broad local support for the \$7.5 billion state water bond that voters approved last November, but that backing was earned with promises of new dams at Temperance Flat above Lake Millerton and at Sites Reservoir in Colusa County. “That was how it was sold to us. But since November we have not had one good discussion coming from the governor about these projects.”

The 15-minute talk ended with a promise to pass on Brandau’s points to Brown. A return phone call may — or may not — be forthcoming. Still, Brandau viewed it as a positive development.

But as with the past efforts of Nunes and Hannity, Brandau's billboard won't work, says former Assembly Member Sarah Reyes, a Fresno Democrat.

"One billboard along 99 that is a message to the governor isn't going to change the world," she says. "It gives more publicity to Steve Brandau than to the issue in front of the governor."

Cummins, the Fresno State professor, says there's likely "some electoral incentive" for Brandau, who will be up for re-election next year. Cummins says it also could help get Brandau attention for a Fresno mayoral run, though Brandau has said he's not campaigning for that seat and is supporting fellow Council Member Lee Brand.

Brandau says he has paid for a second billboard location, due to be up Friday. Several Brandau supporters want to take the billboard message beyond Fresno to other parts of the state. Brandau isn't opposed to that, but thinks the billboard's message may need to be adjusted to fit each particular region of California.

One area that may need tweaking is Brandau's suggestion that high-speed rail has been given special environmental treatment.

The project is a state priority, with Brown and legislative leaders in support. Brown has directed money generated by the state's cap-and-trade program to the bullet train. The state is using eminent domain powers when necessary to assemble the needed land for the project. But it has not skirted environmental laws or been given special treatment in that area, says Tom Richards, a Fresno developer who serves as vice chairman of the California High-Speed Rail Authority board.

Contact John Ellis: [jellis@fresnobee.com](mailto:jellis@fresnobee.com), (559) 441-6320 or [@johnellis24](https://twitter.com/johnellis24) on Twitter.