

## A high-speed rail from L.A. to Las Vegas? China says it's partnering with U.S. to build

For decades private developers and entrepreneurs have periodically announced bold plans to run high-speed trains between Las Vegas and Los Angeles.

None have gotten anywhere because they lacked money or suffered other setbacks.

On Thursday, however, one long-discussed proposal appeared to gain some intriguing support.

Officials for XpressWest, which has been unable to secure adequate private investors in the United States or a \$5.5-billion federal loan, announced that it had formed a partnership with China Railway International USA, a consortium led by China Railway, the national railroad of the People's Republic of China.

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Details about the joint venture, the proposed project and its financing were unavailable Thursday, except China Railway International stated that it would provide initial capital of \$100 million. Project officials say they are confident construction could begin as early as September 2016.

XpressWest, a private company formerly called DesertXpress, has been talking about its high-speed rail project since at least 2007. Plans have called for a 185-mile route that would run adjacent to heavily-traveled Interstate 15 from Las Vegas to Victorville, 85 miles northeast of downtown Los Angeles.

Chinese officials now describe the project as a 230-mile route with an additional stop in Palmdale and eventual service throughout the Los Angeles area using some of the same track that would be used by the publicly backed California high-speed rail project.

Federal railroad records indicate that XpressWest has already secured approvals and permits from a number of federal agencies for the 185-mile route. Additional permits, approvals and environmental analysis would be needed for the 230-mile proposal.

"As China's first high-speed railway project in the United States, the project will be a landmark in overseas investment for the Chinese railway sector and serve as a model of international cooperation," Yang Zhongmin, chairman of China Railway International, told the state-run Xinhua News Agency.

Chinese officials disclosed the joint venture during a news conference in Beijing. XpressWest representatives also issued a brief statement on their website, but declined to comment until additional regulatory approvals are obtained.

The announcements of cooperation come just days before Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit to the United States.

XpressWest agreed this month to form a joint venture with China Railway International to build and operate the railway, Shu Guozeng, deputy head of the government's Office of the Central Leading Group for Financial and Economic Affairs, said at the news conference, according to Xinhua.

China has built the most extensive high-speed railway network in the world with about 10,000 miles of track. The nation's train makers and railroad builders are eager to expand overseas now that China's network is somewhat built-out and the country's domestic economy is slowing.

“Little is known yet, but this is fascinating,” said Martin Wachs, professor emeritus of urban planning at UCLA and former director of the UC Transportation Center, a research institute. “If this is serious and a real commitment that allows XpressWest to build something, that is important.”

Wachs said the motive for the Chinese might be to establish a toehold in the nascent high-speed rail industry in the United States.

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“Even if they lose money,” he added, “they could develop a market for Chinese technology and services by demonstrating that they can implement a project.”

According to the XpressWest website and its Chinese counterpart, the train would transport passengers between Las Vegas and Victorville in 80 minutes, with fares set at \$89. Many L.A.-area riders, however, would still have to drive or take buses to the station using busy I-15.

According to the project’s environmental analysis, the train would attract enough passengers to reduce I-15 traffic by about 3 million annual trips. Because of heavy weekend traffic on the highway, driving between Southern California and Las Vegas can take at least four hours.

Project officials say the transportation shift would reduce air pollution from automobiles, cut fuel consumption, improve highway safety and limit the need to expand I-15.

Lisa Marie Alley, a spokeswoman for the California High-Speed Rail Authority, said the agency has had ongoing discussions with XpressWest to explore combining both systems and to ensure that XpressWest trains are designed to operate on the authority’s track. Alley added that the high-speed rail authority has not yet allowed XpressWest to use its right-of-way.

XpressWest materials state that although the project has adopted an “assemble and manufacture in America” plan, the manufacturing base for high-speed trains is “not yet mature.”

Therefore, venture backers indicated they intended to partner with foreign suppliers for the estimated 42 train sets they anticipate needing, with assembly being performed in southern Nevada.

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## UPDATED

**8:40 p.m.:** This article has been updated with additional reporting throughout and with comments from an official with the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

This article was originally posted at 8:28 a.m. Thursday.

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