

McCarthy: Use high-speed rail funds to quench California's drought

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House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, a persistent critic of California's high-speed rail program, said that the funds for the project should be diverted to quench the state's severe drought.

The California Republican made the proposal Wednesday after [the Los Angeles Times reported](#) that the system's contractor pegged the cost of building the initial segment at 31 percent above the original estimate, but the California High Speed Rail Authority did not use that figure in its 2014 business plan.

The [authority](#) took issue with the newspaper's report, saying that some costs in the \$68 billion project have actually come down as bids have gone out.

That didn't stop McCarthy from pitching a proposal that isn't likely to happen.

"Moving funds from high-speed rail to drought relief would take the courage to acknowledge that current policy is a waste of time and money and then change course," McCarthy said in a statement.

Unlocking the high-speed rail funds would be difficult, if not impossible to achieve. The Obama administration pledged more than \$3 billion from the president's 2009 economic stimulus, and that money must be spent on the project.

"You can figure out what somebody would have to do to change all that," said Dan Richard, the authority's chairman. "By the way, we would end up owing the federal government what they gave us."

California voters approved roughly \$9 billion in bonds for the project in 2008. They could reverse it next year, if a measure gets on the ballot to allow them to do so. But a 2012 proposal to revote on the bonds never made it that far.

Meanwhile, Gov. Jerry Brown and other state and local leaders [broke ground](#) on the system in Fresno in January and construction on the first leg is under way.

Richard said some in McCarthy's hometown of Bakersfield are "begging" for a heavy maintenance facility to be built there as part of the project, employing 1,000 or more.

"The irony of this, of course," Richard said, "is that the majority leader should be checking with his district."

McCarthy is hardly the first critic to suggest that California's high-speed rail funds would be better spent elsewhere. In 2013, Rep. Jeff Denham, a California Republican who [chairs the rail subcommittee](#) in the House of Representatives, said improving [Amtrak's Northeast Corridor](#) would be investment in "an area where we have proven ridership."

California has the [highest Amtrak ridership levels](#) outside the Northeast.

Even California Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Democrat who once supported the project, [said in 2014](#) that the funds should be redirected to "more pressing infrastructure needs."