

Bullet train agency is expected to go forward with business plan despite widespread criticism

Ralph
Vartabedian

[Contact Reporter](#)

The state high-speed rail authority is poised to adopt a new business plan at a board meeting Thursday, despite concerns voiced by lawmakers, regional officials and independent experts.



The draft business plan, released in February, was criticized for its lack of specificity about the source of funding to complete the \$64-billion project.

The Legislative Analyst's Office called for more explanation about how the rail authority would close a \$43.5-billion funding gap to complete the system. Local groups expressed serious concerns about the effects the project would have on their communities.

More than 200 public comments were submitted by farmers, regional planning authorities, cities and groups supporting or opposing the plan.

The city of San Jose said the \$50 million the state budgeted to prepare the local train station for high-speed rail operations was far too low. The city suggested the cost would be \$1 billion to \$2 billion.

[Who is going to pay for the bullet train to L.A.?](#)

San Francisco said it remained a "champion" of the project but wanted a \$2-billion contribution for its Transbay Terminal in downtown reinstated. The new plan cuts the contribution by \$1.5 billion.

Cities in the San Joaquin Valley suggested the authority budget \$3 billion for local rail improvements, saying funding at that level would be consistent with the authority's plan to invest \$2 billion in the Burbank-to-Anaheim corridor.



All the demands or recommendations would add more money than the \$4 billion the new business plan shaved off the plan it replaced, which called for spending \$68 billion.

[See the most-read stories this hour >>](#)

Those savings came from various engineering changes — some of which are now under review. For instance, the state fire marshal is reviewing the authority plan to save money by eliminating an emergency ventilation system from mountain tunnels, one of which could be 17 miles long and require a lengthy evacuation in any kind of accident.

Almond farmer Kole Upton said the state should not sacrifice people with long-standing roots in their communities.

[Interested in the stories shaping California? Sign up for the free Essential California newsletter >>](#)

Retired [World Bank](#) executive William Grindley submitted a 167-page analysis that asserted the rail system would fail to achieve its financial and transportation objectives, arguing its ridership projections are overblown and it will require massive subsidies.

Joseph Eisenberg, one of many individuals who sent comments, said he commended the rail authority "for this improved, realistic business plan. I would strongly support further federal and state support to complete the full HSR system."

The Legislature has held three hearings on the plan this year, subjecting it to greater scrutiny than any proposal by the rail authority in recent years.

But by and large, the plan is expected to be adopted as written, a state official close to the project said Wednesday.

"The board will pass it tomorrow with few revisions," said the official, who is not authorized to speak to the news media. The rail authority's news representatives did not return calls or emails.

A staff memorandum posted to the rail authority's website took note of a number of the concerns, including the objections of Merced over not being part of an initial operating segment, which is to run from San Jose to a vacant farm field north of Shafter.

Bakersfield officials want the initial segment to run roughly a dozen miles south of Shafter to reach their city at a cost of \$2.9 billion.

San Francisco is not happy about the train stopping in San Jose. Southern California officials want a "clear affirmation" of commitments made in 2012 for funding certain projects.

The staff did not propose to address any of those concerns. Instead, the memo said staff would "present options for the board's consideration" and "seek guidance for addressing the issues."

The wording appeared to leave open the possibility that approval of the plan would be delayed. Under the law, the business plan must be completed and presented to the Legislature by May 1, meaning any delay might have required a special board meeting.

The official close to the project said the board may make comments for the record without ordering changes to the plan.

ralph.vartabedian@latimes.com

[Join the conversation on Facebook >>](#)

ALSO

[Santee community rallies in support of a gender-neutral bathroom after fight](#)

[As UC Berkeley tries to close its deficit, administrators feel the ire of traditional faculty allies](#)

[Homeless measures take center stage in Mayor Garcetti's 2016 budget proposal](#)