Why California Must Study the Altamont Pass Alternative In Its High-speed Rail EIR

The final planning documents filed by the California High Speed Rail Commission (HSRC) in 1996 stated that “Of the three northern mountain pass options . . . the Commission recommends the Altamont Pass for linking the Central Valley to the greater San Francisco Bay Area.” HSRC found that “Public opinion primarily favors the Altamont Pass. Most cities and counties in the Northern San Joaquin Valley have passed resolutions favoring the Altamont Pass.”

Now, as the High Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) prepares to file its environmental documents for the massive high-speed rail project, the Altamont route is not even being studied. Altamont is the best route for environmental, transportation, and cost reasons and must be included in the EIR/EIS.

Altamont Has Fewer Impacts
“Overall, the Pacheco Pass option would have more negative environmental impacts as compared to Altamont Pass option.”

- The Pacheco and Diablo routes now being favored by the Commission are predominantly undeveloped and cross the largest roadless wilderness area in the Coastal Range and the second largest state park in California. Damage from building high speed rail through this contiguous wilderness area will be severe and essentially unmitigable.
- The Pacheco/Hamilton routes would impact a biologically rich habitat with unique, intact California landscape of oak woodlands, sycamore valleys, stream-fed canyons and pine topped ridges. Both routes would affect species such as bobcats, mountain lions, the San Joaquin kit fox, tule elk, pronghorn, golden eagles, wintering bald eagles, red-tail hawks, burrowing owls, the California tiger salamander, red-legged frog, western pond turtle, rainbow trout, foothill yellow-legged frog, and bay checkerspot butterfly.

Altamont Has Lower Costs
- Altamont route would cost significantly less to build, saving between $720 million and $2 billion.
- Altamont has fewer miles of track, therefore substantially lower capital, maintenance and operating costs for the entire life of the high speed rail project.
- Pacheco/Hamilton require many more miles of tunnel construction, and therefore massive increased capital costs, than Altamont. According to HSRC, “Since it is shorter and has fewer tunnels, the Altamont Pass is less costly than the Pacheco Pass.”
- Pacheco/Hamilton have longer grades and more altitude gain than Altamont. This means slower trains, more fuel consumption, and rougher operating conditions. Put another way, “The Pacheco Pass is . . . 37-45 percent higher [than Altamont] on a per mile basis.”
- Altamont would allow MTC / HSRA to work together to build a railroad bridge at Dumbarton, minimizing the overall cost and impact of the already-planned bridge.

Altamont Serves More Travel
- Altamont serves Los Banos, Gilroy and Morgan Hill with combined populations of only 100,000 people.
- Altamont allows San Francisco trains to reach dedicated high-speed track much sooner after leaving San Francisco, providing the less-than-3-hour Los Angeles travel time required by the bonding legisla-

- Altamont connects to existing public transit systems, including BART at Livermore and Fremont, will reduce station costs and increase ridership. Altamont ridership would exceed that of the other alignments, because it runs closer to the center of population of the Bay Area, and can provide superior service for an additional three million people in the East Bay, Stockton and Sacramento who would benefit from faster travel times.
TRAC, Train Riders Association of California, active since 1984, is a non-profit consumer lobby advocating improved passenger train service in California.

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