

EUROPEAN HIGH-SPEED TRAINS DON'T INVADE NEIGHBORHOODS

HSRA'S DISTORTED IDEAS ON RAIL IMPROVEMENTS DON'T RESEMBLE EUROPE'S HIGH-SPEED RAIL AT ALL HSRA'S REAL MODEL: 1960'S DRIVE FOR ELEVATED URBAN FREEWAYS

by Richard F. Tolmach

California cities expecting fast trains to revive their downtowns may get the opposite, with plans for 217 mph operation through at least 12 cities revealed by California's High-Speed Rail Authority (HSRA). The politically volatile plan was unveiled at a workshop in Sacramento August 6.

Project Manager Tony Daniels, the Authority's lead Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB) employee, showed a train performance table with 217 mph speeds through Morgan Hill, Gilroy, Chowchilla, Madera, Fresno, Hanford, Corcoran, Shafter, Wasco, Bakersfield, Lancaster and Palmdale, and indicated it was the basis for the 2 hour 40 minute San Francisco-Los Angeles schedule.

217 mph trains produce 95 to 100 dB impacts almost as loud as noise at the end of a runway, one reason why European and Japanese railroads avoid operation above 165 mph within cities of any size. Even 125 mph rail operation is a major source of blight. Cities with any environmental sense do not consent to become Thunder Alley, but affected cities are largely unaware of noise impacts, because HSRA failed to disclose them in the Program EIR process.

Environmental concerns about the project were originally limited to a swath of the Peninsula where HSRA announced after the November 2008 vote its plans to demolish and reconstruct on an elevated structure or berm a 40-mile swath of Caltrain tracks. This would destroy two decades of station improvements at all intermediate stops, remove thousands of mature trees through upper income neighborhoods, and install a permanent source of urban blight.

HSRA ARROGANCE INVADES EAST LA

HSRA has recently broadened concerns about environmental issues to about 20 other cities via its August 6 speed disclosure and similar heavy-handed tactics in Southern California. Since July, HSRA has unveiled a new route through residential areas between Anaheim and Los Angeles without advance notice or specific details. It also tried to pressure cities to respond by an arbitrary August 31 deadline.

"None of these plans have been engineered enough for us to articulate about it," Steve Forster, director of public works for La Mirada was quoted in the Whittier Daily News. "Will there be two, three or four new tracks installed? Will they be at grade or 80 feet in the air?" La Mirada officials indicated they thought the line should be adjacent to the Santa Ana (I-5) Freeway instead of BNSF tracks in order to be further away from residents.

Santa Fe Springs City Manager Fred Latham echoed the sentiment, indicating the train "will go through a lot of residential neighborhoods." Latham said, "The cities aren't willing to compromise their interest or abandon them to the fast-track process."

Behind the scenes, HSRA staff has reportedly told Fullerton and Norwalk city officials that both cities will lose their existing Metrolink stations, and that they will have to decide which city will get one new replacement stop, a coercive and destructive position counter to the interests of both cities.

City officials indicate they may put together a joint powers authority to negotiate with the rail authority, or may use the existing JPA formed to work on the I-5 widening. Corridor residents have long experience with bad public works projects, and impacts of I-5 and BNSF trains on the corridor are already severe. The heavily Hispanic neighborhoods look like they may become the next flashpoint in the high-speed battle. This is needless, because BNSF triple-tracking is capable of producing sufficient rail capacity.



Photo © Deutsche Bahn AG

EUROPE TARGETS RAIL INVESTMENT TO HIGH-SPEED BYPASSES FRANCE BUILDS 5 MILES FOR THE COST OF 1 CALIFORNIA MILE

NO CREDIBLE PLAN FOR COMPLETION

Goldman Sachs' report at the September 3 HSRA meeting revealed there is no credible plan to stretch \$7.5 billion of remaining funding to cover the 500-mile SF-Anaheim starter line via private sector involvement. The shortfall is at very least \$32 billion, and may be as much as \$80 billion. In such straits, HSRA does not have capital to waste on goldplating existing urban lines with elevated structures, the sort of project where \$1 billion won't stretch to 10 miles of track.

Financial reality dictates that first priority is to close California's two major track gaps: Peninsula to Modesto and Bakersfield to Santa Clarita. Closing these gaps would create productive regional service as a first stage and enable private capital to define an affordable Central Valley high-speed link. Only by focusing on cost-effectiveness and allowing private capital a role can California complete this project.

HSRA's stated priority instead is to replicate existing tracks at a much higher capital cost, and fill no track gaps at all. HSRA wants to spend \$9 billion (half in Federal ARRA funds) for four projects to gold-plate facilities from SF to San Jose, Merced to Fresno, Fresno to Bakersfield, and Los Angeles to Anaheim. Redundant overbuilt facilities on these segments have no economic value to California. The Merced to Fresno line is California's own "bridge to nowhere," with no BNSF rail connection on either end and no traffic. These lines would not produce substantial increases in passengers, and provide no practical benefit. Worst of all, the same gaps in California's rail network would persist, and most of the bond money would be gone.

Consider how frugally the Europeans use capital. In 2007, \$5 billion built 186 miles of 200 mph tracks in France, about half the distance from the Bay Area to Los Angeles. The new TGV-Est pointedly avoids every urbanized area along the way, and has only three stops along its spine: two exurban park-and-rides and a station with future tram service on Reims' southern fringe. TGV-Est acts as a high-speed link between conventional tracks. It allows direct trains from Paris to Metz, Luxembourg, Strasbourg, Frankfurt and Stuttgart, cutting travel time by up to two hours.

HSRA plans to spend \$4 billion to obtain just 28 miles, by condemning land, demolishing houses, and trashing neighborhoods from Los Angeles to Anaheim. The line would attain an average speed of only 75 mph, saving about 15 minutes over Amtrak service. Private capital would never consider such a

project because adequate capacity already exists, and the minor time-savings in the Anaheim market don't justify a multi-billion-dollar expenditure.

California's HSR project wastes its capital on political pork. If California were to adopt the French policy of prioritizing investment to rural track segments that can save hours of travel time, our network might cost \$15 to \$20 billion, instead of the \$45 to \$80 billion now projected.

HSR REDEFINED AS BLIGHT RAIL

Caltrain's 47-mile San Francisco-San Jose track has top speeds of 79 mph, and serves cities on the corridor very well. Turning it into a quadruple-track elevated railroad is a wet dream for the Authority, but a nightmare for residents. Trains would have to be shut down for years while a demolition and construction project removes tracks and trees from a swath of the Peninsula and mile by mile erects elevated structures. Once reopened, there would be 300 trains daily, in place of the current 100 Caltrain trips.

Why did Europe stop building elevated trains by about the 1930's? The same reason California stopped building elevated freeways in the 1970's. The model of going into a community, condemning

a right-of-way, and building a noisy, blight-producing facility through its heart is dead. No European railway has dared to do this for years, and even most state highway departments now agree that elevated facilities through neighborhoods are destructive.

I challenge anyone who reads this to provide us a single instance of a 40-mile elevated railroad built since the 1960's through any European urban area. Quadruple-tracking and elevating Caltrain is not only a bad plan, it has nothing to do with modern rail, let alone high-speed rail.

Europe's high-speed railroads are cost effective because they are on the ground. They bypass most intermediate cities instead of blasting through them. They use timed connections or trains that divide, instead of trying to connect every city with a single line. California's project should adopt European methods, not build outmoded elevated railroads.

WASTEFUL DETOURS FOR DEVELOPERS

The excuse for all those expensive elevated structures in cities is that trains have to run so fast. Higher speeds are only required because Authority officials gerrymandered the Bay Area-Los Angeles route, making it nearly 100 miles longer than highway mileage. The extra miles made it impossible to meet the 2 hour 40 minute run time without raising speeds all the way up the line.

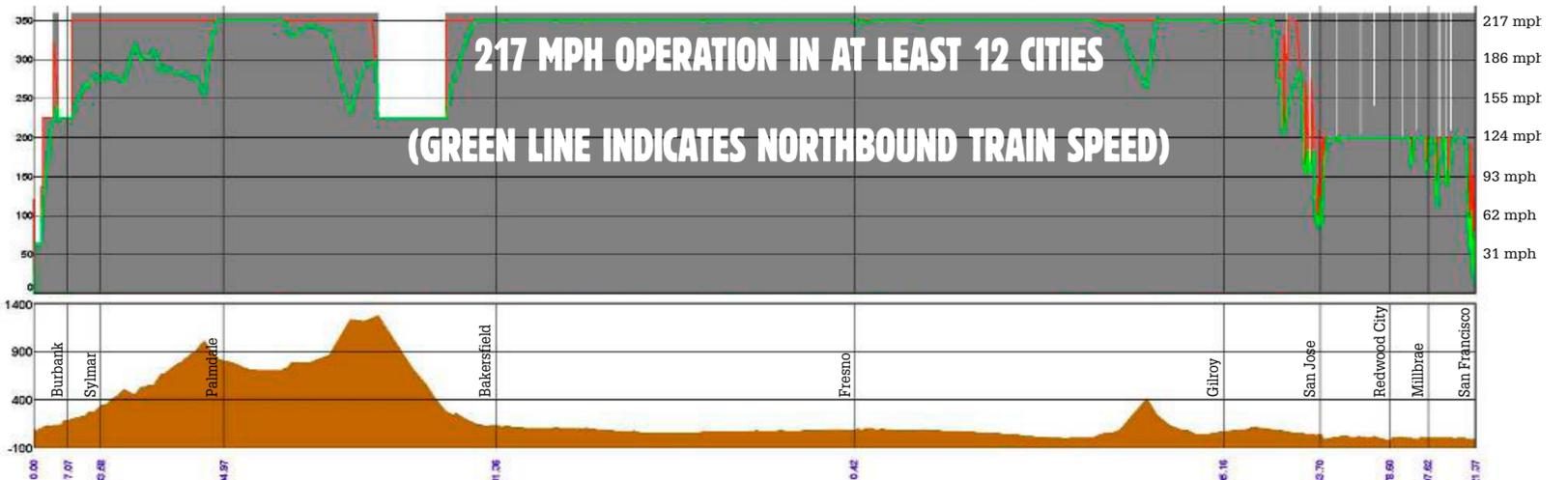
Both the Los Banos detour and the Mojave detour also add unnecessary grades and difficult mountain terrain. The grade from Tehachapi to Bakersfield apparently forces a 140 mph safety speed limit for an unbroken 3600 foot descent, which Tony Daniels candidly calls "no mean feat for a high-speed train."

The obvious question is why trains should run via Tehachapi's tough gradients, with tunnels totaling over 13 miles. Shorter tunnels parallel to the California water project would save about 2000 feet of rise and fall, plus over 20 miles of track and train operating expense. One interpretation of Daniels' statement is that he is calling Tehachapi the Achilles' heel of the project. This idea is underscored by the grade's long impact on train speeds shown on the chart below, and its effect on project costs.

217 mph speeds, grades, and extra miles also undermine claims that HSR saves energy compared to driving. The California project is likely to increase, not reduce, energy waste and greenhouse gases because its route is 20 percent longer than highways and 217 mph trains consume more energy per passenger mile than conventional trains or autos do.

HSRA's high-speed plan wastes scarce funds to goldplate 80 miles of urban track, wastes mileage on detours for developers, and ignores modern European design practice. It eliminates participation of private capital in project risk, creating a funding gap instead of a buildable project. It is time for California leaders to give the project to competent rail engineers who have implemented high-speed rail. It is time to pull the plug on the out-of-control Authority.

PB Train Performance Chart CRN City and MPH annotations. Also see video at http://www.cahighspeedrail.ca.gov/images/chsr/20090814132007_August6thWorkshop.mp4



217 IN CITIES?

PARSONS BRINCKERHOFF'S TONY DANIELS REVEALS 217 MPH HSRA OPERATIONAL PLAN WITH CHART ROD DIRIDON PRETENDS TABLE IS A THEORETICAL DEMONSTRATION

On August 6, HSRA Board Member Rod Diridon and Chair Curt Pringle collaborated to try to deny the reality of the Parsons Brinckerhoff charts and timetables presented by Tony Daniels showing how the 2 hour, 40 minute run time could be achieved on the circuitous route only by running at 217 mph speeds through 12 California cities.

Diridon: "I think that we have to stress that these are demonstration diagrams for our own experience. They're not proposed speed limits or operational characteristics because we haven't done the studies to determine how we're going to operate the trains yet. So they're just demonstrations to try to give us some background."

Daniels had just finished a five minute talk detailing the studies the Authority had done to determine required operating speeds, and asked the board if they had any questions.

"The point," said Diridon, "is that I wouldn't want someone to say, 'oh, it's going to go 200 mph through Morgan Hill.' Well, that's not the case. And we want to make sure that ... everybody knows that these are examples. They're not actual situations, they're not proposed situations."

Daniels gently tried to tell Diridon the speeds were real: "It's against the best information we have. The traction motor curves are real. The alignment is the best alignment we have to date. We will continue to evaluate those, you're correct, as we move forward. But we've used this, and you'll see in the next couple slides, as the basis upon which we've drawn a very detailed timetable and operational plan from which we got the ridership. Okay?"

HSRA Chair Curt Pringle weighed in on Diridon's side, to try to protect HSRA from charges it has predetermined its plan before project EIRs are complete: "Okay, we understand that this is a maximum speed defined by physical conditions but not an operational plan. You're just suggesting that this is what things to consider in terms of what could physically occur but it's not the operational plan of the system. Got it."

Daniels' jaw visibly dropped at the willful misinterpretation, but he still continued to try to explain: "It's likely to be. It's close. You'll see when we go to the timetable and then the operational plan ... it IS close—"

Pringle interrupted him at this point, clearly perturbed at his refusal to endorse Diridon's cover story: "—could you just proceed with your presentation as you've prepared it. Thank you."