HSRA’s Distorted Ideas on Rail Improvements Don’t Resemble Europe’s High-Speed Rail at All

by Richard F. Tolmach

California cities expecting fast trains to revitalize their downtowns are grasping, with plans for 217 mph operation through at least 12 cities revealed by California’s High-Speed Rail Authority. In his August 6 speech, HSRA’s Real Model: 1960’s Drive for Elevated Urban Freeways

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, Chrysler, Madera, Fresno, Hanford, Corcoran, Hanford, Lancaster and Palmdale, and indicated it was the basis for the 2 hour 40 minute San Francisco–Los Angeles schedule.

217 mph trains project 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. Plans would be to evade noise improvements at all interim steps, remove thousands of mature trees through urbanized neighborhoods, and install a permanent source of urban blight.

HSRA Arrogance Invades East LA

HSRA has recently broadened concerns about environmental impacts to include all of the August 6 speech disclosure and similar heavy-handed tactics in Southern California. Since July, HSRA has also wanted to uproot residential areas between Anaheim and Los Angeles without advance notice or some form of compensation for residents and property owners. HSRA repeatedly refuses to respond by an arbitrary August 31 deadline.

“None of these plans have been engineered economically,” said Santa Fe Springs City Manager Fred Latham. “Director of public works for La Mirada was quoted in the Whittier Daily News. ‘Will there be more detours or new track gangs installed in our area as we go through?’ “Steve Daniels, PB Train Performance Chart (Green Line Indicates Northbound Train Speeds)

Goldman Sachs’ report at the September 3 HSRA meeting revealed there is no credible plan to stretch $7.2 billion of remaining funding to cover the 500-mile SF-Anaheim starter line via private sector involve- ment. The shortfall is at very least $22 billion, and may be as much as $80 billion. In such straits, HSRA does not have capital to waste on gaudy floating urban lines with elevated structures, the sort of project where $1 billion won’t stretch to 10 miles of track. HSRA’s political malfeasance dictates that first priority is to close California’s two major track gaps: Peninsula to Modesto and Bakersfield to Salinas. Closing these gaps would create profitable 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 exist- ing tracks at a much higher capital cost, and fill no track gaps at all. HSRA wants to spend $95 million (laid in Federal ARRA funds) for four projects to upgrade plant facilities from SF to San Jose, Merced to Fresno, Bakersfield to Las Angeles, 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 of the line. These lines would not produce substantial increases in passengers, and provide no practical benefit. Worst of all, the same gaffe in California’s rail network would persist, and most of the bond money would be gone.

Consider how frequently the European 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 projected 39 miles of urban, highly urbanized area along the way, and has only three stops along its spine: two European cities and a station with future train service on Reims’ southern fringe. TGV-Est acts as a high-speed link, not conventional tracks. It allows direct trains from Paris to Metz, Luxembourg, Straasburg, 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 testing traffic near the Los Angeles Zoo. The heavily Hispanic neighborhoods look like they may become the next flashpoint in the high-speed battle. This reaction means BNSF railroad-tracks is capable of producing sufficient rail capacity.

Frequent Rail Service Only the Fastest Drives East

In cities?

European High-Speed Trains Don’t Invade Neighborhoods

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 time- tables presented by Tony Daniels showing how trains would only run by shutting down 2 hour, 40 minute run time could be achieved on the current Peninsula line only by running at 217 mph speeds through 12 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 charac- teristics because we haven’t done the study to determine how we’re going to operate the trains yet. So we’re just demonstrations to try to give us some background.”

Daniels had just finished a five minute talk detail- ing the studies the Authority had done to determine required operating speeds, and asked the board if they had 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 do that and improve on it.”

But we’ve used this, and you’ll see in the next couple slides that there’s a detailed timetable and operational plan from which we got the information. Okay?”

HSRA Chair Curt Pringle weighed in on Diridon’s side, to try to protect HSRA from charges it has pre- determined the plan before project EIRs are complete.

“Oh, okay we understand that this is a maximum speed determined by physical plant, but not an operational plan. You’re just suggesting that is what things to consider in terms of what could physically occur but not what we’re going to do. But this is the way it’s going to be.”

Daniels’ jaw visibly dropped at the willful misin- terpretation, but he still continued to try to explain: “It’s likely to be far closer. You’ll see when we get to the timetable and then the operational plan it is closer.”

Pringle interrupted him at this point, clearly per- cepting his refusal to endorse Diridon’s cover story.

“...he didn’t say that just on your presentation as you’ve prepared it. Thank you.”

Europe targets rail investment to high-speed bypasses

Parsons Brinckerhoff’s Tony Daniels reveals chart with 217 mph HSRA Operational Plan with chart

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186 mph

217 mph

154 mph

124 mph

93 mph

62 mph

31 mph

186 mph

124 mph

93 mph

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217 in cities?

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