

High-speed rail boondoggle

By Quentin Kopp

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A Bay Area column by Andy Kunz and Ezra Silk condemning Elon Musk’s promise to make “a useful humanoid robot as quickly as possible” and then condemning Musk’s 2013 proposed Hyperloop train system to transport passengers from Los Angeles to San Francisco at 760 mph falsely claimed California’s high-speed rail project was “under construction ... and at a fraction of the cost.” Kunz is president and Silk is political director of the U.S. High Speed Rail Coalition, a trade group promoting high-speed rail unsuccessfully in the United States for 26 or more years. They, like other promoters, disregard the failure in our nation to develop a high-speed rail system. The California High-Speed Rail Authority, for example, has not laid any of its proposed diesel tracks for Merced to Bakersfield service unless you consider bridges and viaducts as “tracks.” The U.S. High Speed Rail Association also ignores the fact that no other state purports to build high-speed rail, despite its 58 years of operation in Japan and subsequent commencement in France, Germany, etc.



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By definition, high-speed rail is electrified, not diesel. Almost all such systems in the world function as private entities without taxpayer subsidy (Communist China is an exception). That was my vision in introducing enabling legislation as a state senator and chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee in 1992. Such legislation was finally, after one veto by then-Governor Pete Wilson, enacted before I left the Legislature in 1998. Ultimately, in November 2008 a \$9.95 billion state general obligation bond issue was presented to taxpayers and, as then chairman of the California High-Speed Rail Authority governing board, I led the campaign. Voters narrowly approved it 52% to 48% as U.S. Sen. Barack Obama was elected U.S. president. The measure prohibited any taxpayer operating subsidies and specified travel times such as San Francisco to Los Angeles in two hours 40 minutes.

In 2008, the governing board plan contemplated federal, regional and private equity financing and construction of a test electrified train in the Central Valley. After my term on the governing board as a state Senate appointee ended, the project collapsed. No private investment or regional funding occurred. Then President Obama and Congress donated approximately \$3.5 billion of federal money in 2009-10, but later the U.S. House of Representatives forbade additional federal financing.

Instead of test track in the Central Valley, the authority governing board authorized Merced to Bakersfield as the first segment of 171 miles, not electrified (because of lack of funds), but diesel. Theoretically, if built, the train would compete with Amtrak's parallel Central Valley service — without government subsidy! It's fanciful.

The state Legislature, after three years of stopping the sale of \$4.2 billion of unsold 2008 general obligation bond, relented this fiscal year to allow such sale and expenditure. Estimated cost-to-completion of electrified trains from San Francisco to the Los Angeles Basin is about \$1 trillion, not the \$33 million as expressed to voters in 2008. Contrary to hucksters, current voter support hasn't been evaluated and not a single foot of even diesel track has been laid. More than 2,000 parcels, mostly farmland, need purchase at market value by eminent domain seizure. That effort still hasn't been completed; although court case disputes over land value continue. The 2008 bond proceeds have been spent on increasing—

office staff, private contractors building bridges and viaducts and public relations swill. After that remaining \$4.2 billion bond money is spent, there's no money for a project ballyhooed originally to open in 2020.

My personal dream has vanished. The authority spends \$1.8 million per day and even its engineering projections show incompleteness in this century.

The high-speed rail project now lies, as one wag proclaimed, in the graveyard of boondoggles. I am complicit.

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