

Another high-speed rail vote may be needed

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It would not be surprising if voters who read the latest report of California's High Speed Rail Authority feel more than a little bit bait-and-switched.

Let's look at the ways this report (www.cahighspeedrail.ca.gov/library.asp?p=8200) differs from the way Proposition 1A was hyped in November 2008, when \$9.95 billion worth of state bonds for high-speed rail passed by a narrow 52-48 percent margin.

Even then, the bonds were expected to cover less than one-fourth of the cost of this system, which aims by 2035 to carry more than 120,000 riders per day at speeds topping 200 mph. The rest of the money is to come from federal funds, private investors and possible revenue bonds that would be paid off with money from fares.

Less than 18 months after voters approved the high-speed rail system, it's tentatively planned to run from San Diego to Los Angeles to San Francisco via Pacheco Pass and San Jose, with an eventual spur line to Sacramento and stops in places as disparate as Anaheim, the Inland Empire east of Los Angeles, the Antelope Valley and Bakersfield.

Most of that was envisioned in the proposition voters approved. But the latest fare forecast was not. As presented in 2008, fares were to run about \$55

one-way between Los Angeles and San Francisco, designed to be competitive with airfares that now often hover just under \$60, even though cheaper ones can occasionally be found.

But the new plan calls for a one-way charge of \$105, about 83 percent of the \$125 the rail authority predicts airfares will run in 2035. That near-doubling of prospective fares would reduce expected ridership by almost one-third. In short, as much fun as high-speed trains are to ride, they would probably never be affordable for vast numbers of Californians.

Meanwhile, no change is anticipated in the \$647 million annual cost of repaying interest and principal on the bonds. That money will be paid not just by riders and residents of areas the project might serve, but also by non-riders and residents of the vast portions of California who would have to travel as much as several hundred miles just to glimpse a high-speed train zip past. From the moment the first of the bonds are issued, repaying them will become a higher priority for the next 30 years than any state program except public schools.

And then there are the environmental questions. Cities such as Menlo Park and Atherton are already fighting a plan for an above-ground line dividing their cities along the route between San Jose and San Francisco, where 31,000 riders daily are expected to enjoy commute times of 31 minutes or less. At the time of the vote, the route was known; not the notion of a 15-foot divider splitting many cities on the Peninsula. The need to widen existing rail rights-of-way, spawning likely eminent domain takeovers of an as-yet-unknown number of homes, was also not advertised.

Anyone who's ridden the high-speed trains of France, Spain, Belgium, England and Japan knows

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how comfortable and convenient and enjoyable they can be. But given the revised fare structure and accompanying ridership estimates, it's fair to wonder whether they should be partially funded in California by tax money from millions of people who may never ride them.

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Another question is whether all this is worth it in order to get the flashy transport system that would result and the approximately 600,000 high-paid new jobs the new report says bullet trains would create. Those issues will hang over this plan from now until the system actually opens.

All of which means it might be wise for the Legislature, which put last year's Proposition 1A on the ballot, to submit the plan revisions to another statewide vote.

That's never before been done with any bond issue. Once passed, every bond approved by California voters has eventually been sold, one reason the state (not counting local governments) now has a total bond debt of \$89 billion and makes yearly debt payments of about \$10 billion.

There's no question in anyone's mind that having high-speed rail would be good for California, taking traffic off freeways, offering a spectacular new tourist attraction and speeding travel for millions of riders yearly.

The question is whether Californians feel the system now planned is the one they voted to pay for and whether they still believe it's worthwhile after two years of budget problems like no American state has ever endured.

The only way to answer that fairly is to stage another vote. But legislators usually frown on re-dos, so don't hold your breath waiting for one.

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