

Politics

High-speed rail system: Leaders mull benefits, fears Federal grant makes project more likely to happen, they say.

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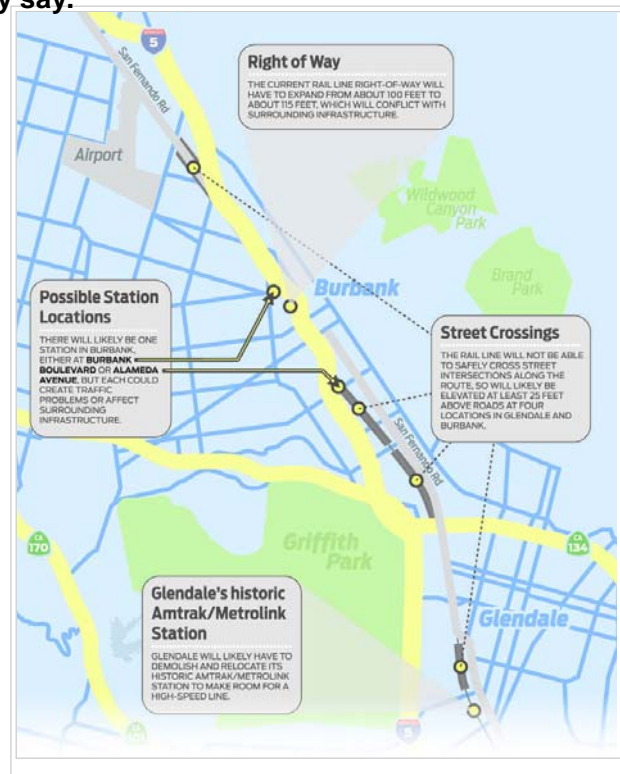
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A planned \$40-billion, intrastate high-speed rail system may bring a surge of jobs and new development along the Burbank-Glendale part of the route, but city officials say they are leery of the potential impacts.

Existing rail corridors would have to be expanded, cutting into surrounding properties and infrastructure; raised tracks would have to be built to avoid clashing with road crossings; Glendale's historic train station would have to be moved to accommodate a closer railroad right-of-way; Bob Hope Airport could be isolated from the line; and Burbank's Metrolink station could be relocated, altering city plans crafted around the current site.

At the same time, the benefits of the plan could be extensive for the region, including tens of thousands of new jobs associated with the system's construction. The proposed 800-mile project would be capable of whisking passengers from Los Angeles to San Francisco in 2 hours and 38 minutes, according to the California High Speed Rail Authority. A station planned for Burbank could also attract new businesses and commuter residents, officials and economists say.



Still, concerns about high-speed trains are already presenting an array of difficult considerations for local authorities, even before rail representatives have completed a draft report on possible options for the area.

Increased traffic congestion and construction to accommodate the new rail system could dramatically affect surrounding property, infrastructure and communities, city officials say.

The prospect of trains capable of reaching 250 mph shuttling through the region as often as 10 times an hour — running at a maximum speed of 150 mph in Glendale and Burbank — has also put officials on edge about the resulting noise and safety considerations, which rail representatives say will be less significant than those presented by Metrolink trains.

The rail authority is in the earliest stages of developing plans for the line, and it has not presented any official proposals for development in the region.

But a recent federal \$2.25-billion grant for the project has allowed it to pick up enough steam that area leaders are now taking the project more seriously, they said.

"This project has more momentum than just being a conceptual project, and I think we have to, from just a practical standpoint, treat it as if it's going to happen," Burbank City Councilman Dave Golonski said.

Roadblocks

The high-speed line is slated to share the current Metrolink and freight corridors along San Fernando Road, but the rail authority will have to avoid a series of street intersections that would otherwise create safety hazards or force trains to slow down, said Dan Tempelis, senior project manager for the Los Angeles area.

To do so, the authority is considering raising the rail line at least 25 feet above street level at four locations along the San Fernando Road corridor in Glendale and Burbank, Tempelis said.

Two roads — Doran Street in Glendale and Arvilla Avenue in Burbank — would be permanently closed at the rail corridor to accommodate the high-speed lines. Engineers are also contemplating a road overpass at West Broadway in Burbank.

"Because of the speeds that we're talking about here, everything will be entirely grade-separated," Tempelis told the Burbank City Council last week during one of three presentations his group has made in the area this month. "In other words, high-speed rail can't share the road network with vehicles, and it can't share any pedestrian access at all. So you can think of this as a sealed cocoon, if you will, with access at stations along the corridor."

Some officials and community stakeholders took issue with the \$3.2-billion price tag for the local section of the corridor, asking why the authority wouldn't slow trains down to share tracks with Metrolink and freight operators, instead of building dedicated high-speed tracks.

"I still don't quite understand why they are doing this in this area," said Glendale City Councilwoman Laura Friedman, who suggested cutting off high-speed operations while trains move through urban centers. "Why don't they start it in Palmdale?"

Rail officials contend that they need the high-speed capabilities to meet their target travel times for express trains, and that maintaining the technology and dedicated tracks through urban areas is critical to avoiding unnecessary delays.

Although high-speed trains will share existing rail lines with commuter operators between San Jose and San Francisco, that region's existing rail system is large enough to accommodate the new, electric-powered high-speed trains, said Jeffrey Barker, deputy executive director of the authority.

Still, the authority is open to adjusting maximum speeds and working with communities to solve concerns about construction, Barker said.

"We haven't come to any conclusions, by any means," he said.

Tight on space

While the authority has identified the existing San Fernando Road rail corridor as the most ideal route for the high-speed system, that railroad right-of-way is not large enough for an additional two tracks, Tempelis said.

Metrolink and freight trains run along the center of a corridor that is about 100 feet wide, but the authority would need to shift the existing tracks west and add high-speed tracks on the east side of the route, which would expand the right-of-way to about 115 feet, he said.

That would create problems with existing traffic infrastructure that abuts the route, as well as surrounding properties, proposed developments, planned freeway expansion and Glendale's historic Amtrak/Metrolink station.

When Glendale City Council members raised concerns about the potential demolition of the commuter station, built in a Spanish colonial revival style in 1923, authority representatives responded with a possible compromise.

"You won't lose that," said Steven Ortmann, station planning manager for the authority. "Just move it."

Coming up with a plan to adjust or relocate a historic station to accommodate the tracks will be a challenge, said Jano Baghdanian, Glendale's traffic and transportation administrator.

"It's not as simple as moving a street 10 or 15 feet," he said.

Similar challenges will face the authority all along the corridor, where it will have to expand the current right-of-way into roads and properties, including the 2.1-acre site of a planned six-story, 163,090-square-foot mixed-use project that Glendale officials hope will transform south Glendale.

"What should we tell them?" said Glendale Councilman Ara Najarian, referring to the developers of the planned Mitaa Plaza project on Los Feliz Road, which he estimated could cost more than \$20 million. "Back off? There's going to be eminent domain?"

In Burbank, similar infrastructure changes to the already-crowded corridor could cause traffic problems, said David Kriske, the city's principal transportation planner.

The most significant spatial challenge for the high-speed line would be between Burbank Boulevard and Magnolia Street, where the planned addition of carpool lanes and an interchange to the Golden State (5) Freeway will pinch the rail corridor width to 90 feet, Kriske said.

The high-speed line would also take up the right-of-way that the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority had allocated for a light-rail line to Glendale, officials said.

Although the MTA has not allocated funding for that project, it is a part of its long-term plan and may have to be incorporated differently if the county agency decides to move forward with the project in the future, officials said.

Two options for one station. Maybe.

The authority plans to place the first high-speed station north of Los Angeles in Burbank, but the options it is considering exclude the current site of the city's Metrolink station because of a curve in the corridor.

A Burbank station could be located near the border of Glendale, as part of a raised section of track at Alameda Avenue, or near Burbank's downtown core on a vacant lot at Burbank Boulevard, according to options being studied by the authority.

Rail authority representatives have suggested relocating the Metrolink station to be on the same premises as the high-speed stop, which requires a long straight stretch of track, but that idea hasn't caught on with Burbank stakeholders concerned about the potential traffic impacts.

While the Burbank Boulevard option could bring increased traffic, particularly with the addition of 2,000 parking spaces for the train stop, a site at Alameda Avenue could be a congestion nightmare for residents near the Ventura (134) Freeway and Interstate 5, which are not fully connected by interchanges, officials said.

"Personally, I think that there's some big pros and cons to both of these locations, and perhaps I'm not sure that Burbank really even wants a high-speed rail station," said Golonski, echoing concerns that came up at a Burbank community stakeholders meeting this week.

Airport disconnection

And despite an emphasis on connecting commuters to high-speed public transit, the trains would zip past Bob Hope Airport, leaving it isolated from riders who might want to use the rail line to travel from other parts of California and catch flights.

Area leaders and stakeholders have frequently raised concerns about that aspect of the proposed path, asking that it instead be diverted from the San Fernando Road corridor to connect with the airport, but rail representatives have contended the detour would slow the system down.

The high-speed line could accommodate a light-rail-based connection to the airport, but the authority would not fund or develop the link, which could cost between \$200 million and \$400 million, depending on the location of the stop, said Dan Feger, executive director of the Burbank-Glendale-Pasadena Airport Authority.

A connection to the airport could not only help with increasing its accessibility, but also offer rail passengers options for rental car, taxi, bus and light rail services as part of a proposed \$100-million regional transportation center at Bob Hope Airport, Feger said.

"It provides a whole suite of options of 'What do you do once you get off the high-speed rail,' which they're not thinking about," he said.