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California High-Speed Rail finalizes plans for segment from San Francisco to San Jose

by Benjamin Schneider Examiner staff writer
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California High-Speed Rail planning

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High-Speed Rail train

A rendering of a High-Speed Rail locomotive in motion.

California High-Speed Rail Authority

As California High-Speed Rail fights for its life in Sacramento, the agency leading the project is forging ahead with plans to bring the railroad to San Francisco.

Menlo Park
515 El Caminc



The California High-Speed Rail Authority (CAHSR) on June 10 published the final environmental impact report for the San Francisco-to-San Jose project section. If the report is approved by the authority's board of directors in August, the project will be environmentally cleared from San Francisco to the northern part of Los Angeles County.

"This is a big deal," said Boris Lipkin, the rail authority's Northern California regional director. "It puts us in a position to keep the program moving and get it towards construction. So it's an exciting time."



But even as it clears regulatory milestones, the project continues to face major hurdles in the state Capitol, where legislators are still debating whether to allocate the remainder of the 2008 voter-approved bond to the project. Peninsula cities along the proposed route are also resisting, with at least two threatening to sue over CAHSR's plans.

The \$5.3 billion San Francisco-to-San Jose segment would proceed along the existing Caltrain tracks from Fourth and King streets to beyond San Jose's Diridon Station. Caltrain's under-construction electrification project, which the authority partially funded, would provide power for the high-speed trains.

A separate project, known as the Downtown Extension, would bring Caltrain and High-Speed Rail trains from Fourth and King streets into the Salesforce Transit Center downtown. That project is environmentally cleared and in line for federal funding. Yet another, more conceptual project, known as the Pennsylvania Avenue Extension, would continue that tunnel through Mission Bay and Potrero Hill.

Much of the work described in the environmental impact report will involve straightening tracks, strengthening road crossings and barriers and altering existing Caltrain stations to accommodate trains traveling at a maximum speed of 110 miles per hour. Currently, the top speed is 78 mph. Once the system is completed, the trip between San Francisco and San Jose will



Another major component of the project is a 100-acre maintenance facility in Brisbane. Under the rail authority's preferred alternative, the facility would be on the east side of the tracks, covering a landfill and land zoned for commercial use. Brisbane vehemently opposes the maintenance facility.


“The project comes through town with a wrecking ball,” said Clayton Holstine, Brisbane’s city manager. The city’s concerns include the “100-acre monstrosity” that is the maintenance facility, as well as the authority's plan to reroute Tunnel Road, the main entrance to downtown Brisbane, and relocate its fire station.

“They’ve acted like an arrogant beast of the state ramrodding itself through a small community,” Holstine said. He thinks the “24 hour industrial facility” will negatively impact the massive Baylands development across the tracks, which could host up to 2,200 homes. The maintenance facility would also prevent the development of a life sciences office campus that would be a major source of tax revenue for Brisbane.

Holstine believes the High Speed rail Authority violated the California Environmental Quality Act by not adequately considering alternative maintenance facilities in Bayview, South San Francisco and Gilroy, adding that Brisbane will likely file a lawsuit against the project. The authority prefers the Brisbane location because it’s a large, mostly vacant site that would allow trains to be fixed and cleaned near the San Francisco terminus.

Millbrae has also registered opposition to plans to expand the combined Millbrae Caltrain and BART station to also serve high-speed trains. At issue is a plot of land that would impinge upon an approved, not-yet-under-construction development known as Millbrae Serra Station, which would include 488 homes and office space. According to the authority's Lipkin, Millbrae approved the development knowing the land would likely be needed by the rail project.





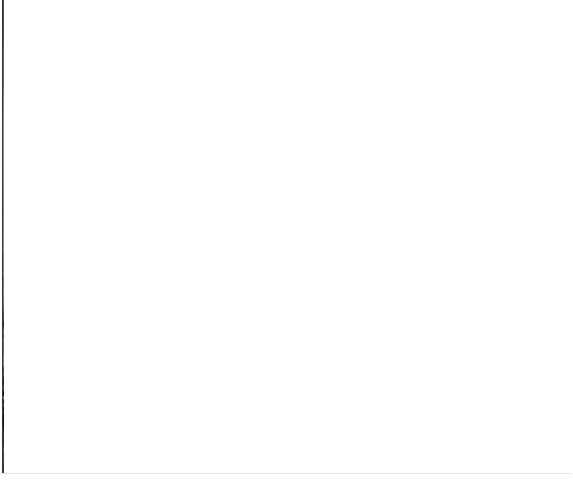
Earlier in the environmental review process, the authority presented an alternative that would have affected a smaller portion of the development. But Millbrae rejected the compromise, and the authority is now recommending the original plan, which would allow for an operationally superior train station and would replace most of the Serra Station development site with parking lots.

City representatives of Millbrae and the developer of Serra Station did not respond to a request for comment, but Millbrae Mayor Anne Oliva previously told the San Mateo Daily Journal "there's obviously going to be some sort of litigation here."

Lipkin said the rail authority will continue to work with property owners to acquire the land it needs. "In most cases, we find a negotiated solution to any acquisitions," he said. "As the backstop to that, if we have necessary property to build out the system, we do have the ability to acquire that through eminent domain."

The preferred alternative for the San Francisco-to-San Jose segment would cost \$5.3 billion. That figure includes over \$1 billion that's double counted with the San Jose-to-Merced project segment, which was environmentally cleared earlier this year.

The cost of the San Francisco-to-San Jose segment is about three times greater than what the authority projected in its 2022 business plan, due to inflation and growing uncertainty about the project's timeline and financing, the Mercury News reported. The cost of the full San Francisco-to-Anaheim high-speed rail system is currently estimated at \$105 billion, though authority CEO Brian Kelly told the Mercury News that figure could now be as high as \$120 billion.



Legislators in Sacramento are debating whether to allocate \$4.2 billion in funds from the original high-speed rail bond approved by voters in 2008 as part of a transportation package that could also include funds to finish Caltrain's electrification project. For the past year and a half, High-Speed Rail has faced resistance from Southern California Democrats who have joined their Republican colleagues in saying they have lost faith in it.

The \$4.2 billion appropriation would provide the project with enough money to finish the under-construction high-speed rail tracks linking Bakersfield and Merced in the Central Valley. The Merced station would provide a transfer to conventional trains bound for Sacramento and the Bay Area.

To extend the high-speed rail system to the state's major population centers and fulfill its promise of a trip between San Francisco and Los Angeles in under three hours will require billions more.

Among possible future funding sources, the authority is looking to federal programs created by the bipartisan infrastructure bill, Lipkin said. He was also encouraged to see that the Metropolitan Transportation Commission included investment in high-speed rail in its Plan Bay Area 2050, making the Bay Area the first region to discuss using local funds for the project.

The nation's first and only true high-speed rail project, California High-Speed Rail has never received much support from the federal government. "When the highways were being built, 80% or 90% of the funds came from the federal government," Lipkin said. "For high-speed rail, so far, about 80% of our funding comes from the state."

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