

California Rail News

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Sacramento Trains Connect



BUT WILL NEW LINK SURVIVE NEXT YEAR?

Public celebrations the first week of December marked the 15th anniversary of the start of Capitol Corridor service and the inauguration of the long-awaited extension of the Sacramento Regional Transit light rail line to the Amtrak station. The festivities, however, were overshadowed by concerns about the future of the station, the light rail connection, and the Capitol Corridor.

Two days before the opening of the light rail line, the City of Sacramento made a commitment of \$95 million of public funding that will break the light rail connection, perhaps by next year. Sacramento will purchase 8.8 acres containing the Amtrak station for \$55 million. It also agreed to pay \$40 million plus half of cost overruns for the Union Pacific Railroad tracks and Amtrak platforms to be moved hundreds of yards away to the north. This means passengers will have a 1200 foot walk from the back of the station to the nearest train door.

Why did the City of Sacramento promise to do something so obviously anti-transit? It appears that the lure of developer dollars was greater for City Council members than the goal of good public transportation.

Sacramento's Amtrak station is by far the strongest in Northern California, with over 900,000 annual passengers, but Union Pacific has been openly hostile to its role in regional public transportation. The reason for this position is not so hard to see.

The land on which the station was built in 1926 was deeded by the city to Southern Pacific to bring train service closer to the

Capitol. At the time, SP's passenger trains were at a competitive disadvantage with Northern Electric trains that departed from 8th and K Streets. Current owner Union Pacific only profits from freight or resources and views downtown land as being too valuable to waste on mere passengers.

To cover its tracks, UP invoked safety, always a winning public relations ploy. According to UP, the curve which brings tracks to the station constitutes a safety hazard and should be replaced with tracks and platforms hundreds of yards away. The land enclosed by the curving tracks and straight passenger platforms just happens to be the most valuable on the entire site. If safety were a real concern, Southern Pacific wouldn't have removed the freight bypass 35 years ago. If UP were sincere, it would have simply rebuilt the freight bypass years ago at its own expense.

Instead, UP spent millions on a ten-year campaign to convince Sacramento to move the tracks, and eventually interposed a third party, Thomas Enterprises, into the deal. Involving Thomas raised the price, but if UP had directly sold the City of Sacramento a parcel for which the city has an arguable claim to title, the transaction could have been challenged easily in court.

Thomas Enterprises claims it cannot tell the public how much it paid UP for the 240 acre railyards parcel, due to a non-disclosure agreement, but City Hall insiders hint that it was very similar to the amount the City paid for just 8.8 acres.

(continued on Page Two)

19 years after light rail transit arrived in Sacramento, the 5-block gap to the Amtrak station was finally bridged. Sacramentans are hoping that the station and connection will remain intact despite city decisions that seem to signal their demise. Photo: R. Tolmach

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OBSERVATIONS

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WILL PROP. 1B
BUILD RAIL?

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PARIS T3 TRAM
PROJECTED TO
CARRY 100,000

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Association
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