

TRAC HEARS KEMPTON ON CAL RAIL FUTURE

by Richard Tolmach

Caltrans Director Will Kempton gave a rousing keynote speech at November's Cal Rail 2020 meeting in Oakland, challenging TRAC members to help set California's rail future. He began by saying he came to speak despite a grueling week, because he "didn't want to deliver a message that I was not interested in passenger rail."

Accompanied by Caltrans rail chief Bill Bronte, Kempton laid out a forward thinking view of California's rail prospects. His leading message was that the 32 trains a day on the Capitol Corridor are the kind of high quality service that could turn the corner for passenger rail in California.

"The difference that [schedule] makes is that we have the frequency of service to make that a very attractive alternative to using the automobile." Kempton called the recent service boost a "positive improvement to the corridor that can take pressure off the highway corridor on Interstate 80."

Kempton told of plans to "get state workers focussed on using the Capitol Corridor and ... say that all trips need to be taken by rail unless you justify the use of an automobile." Citing "90,000 state workers in Sacramento," he noted how state vehicles populate I-80 at peaks. "There is no reason why with the frequency of service we now have between those two points that we can't see a significantly higher number of state business trips taken by rail," said Kempton.

Kempton was candid about the hurdles to expanding rail use. "People don't know about rail service. They are afraid to use it. You go to the light rail station and you look at that farebox machine and you say, naah, not today," said Kempton. "I know because I've done this. I've gone to BART in the early part of my career and looked at the farebox thing and stuck in a dollar and had it kick back a dollar and said 'OK, I'm leaving, and you go away.'"

"One of the problems is getting people comfortable with using transit," said Kempton, noting that once people have a good experience, they become believers. "How can you **not** want to ride from LA to San Diego on the *Pacific Surfliner* or the Coaster when you can sit in the car on the right side of the train looking at some of the most beautiful scenery in the world sipping a glass of chardonnay?" Kempton contrasted this with "driving and fighting the traffic," saying "travel time is not that different."

Citing his commute on Regional Transit's Folsom light rail line, Kempton told how the train is a reliable 50 minute trip that gives him the ability to get work done, while the drive takes "40 minutes on a good day."

Kempton acknowledged California train service is provisional. "When we look around at what's going on in Japan and Asia and Europe in terms of rail, we are neophytes," Kempton said. "We are in the playpen in terms of where we need to mature as far as providing passenger rail operations. There's a suggestion that we could make a modal shift to 10 percent by rail. Before I would commit the Department to saying yes to that goal," Kempton said, he wanted to see if such a target was feasible, but said "it is something that we should consider."

Kempton touted the performance of existing rail corridors, noting that they were first, second and fourth after the Northeast Corridor, but observed that each corridor is handicapped by its isolation. "If you could carry the San Joaquin over to Santa Clarita. If you could get that train over the hill, it connects. If you want to talk ridership, you would see that 800,000 double overnight."

"The biggest problem we have is work-

ing with the private railroads," Kempton acknowledged, citing a trip to Omaha last December, on which he approached U.P. brass about "more cooperation with our passenger rail. They were fairly blunt about it. Their business came first."

"I don't fault them being business people, but I do think they have a responsibility" to provide service to the public. In reference to chronic delays on shared track, Kempton said, "If we don't resolve them, we are going to do business another way," though citing higher costs of exclusive passenger track.

He later criticized past arrangements which gave railroads additional capacity without clear priority for passenger trains. He said he was "not so sure that's a good idea without contractual assurances."

Kempton touted the "recover, reform, rebuild message" of Gov. Schwarzenegger and portrayed the \$37.3 billion infrastructure package as beneficial to rail. "I know that a lot of folks think that is highway-centric," said Kempton. "But I will tell you there is a lot in that bond that's going to help us with developing alternative transportation. There is \$4 billion in the bond for rail and transit, \$400 million of will go for intercity rail. We're going to spend \$125 million of that on new equipment which we sorely need to expand our services."

Kempton also expressed support of local areas formulating plans for rail, and stepped forward with suggestions of how to proceed. "Any opportunities for expansion of rail service in counties where we don't have it, obviously, you need to get those requests to the Division of Rail so they can consider those and provide assistance."

Kempton left the impression that Caltrans supports citizen-led proposals and would "work jointly together to either do an analysis or to help to provide resources for those kinds of research or investment reviews."

"One of the things we are trying to do at Caltrans across the board is change our organization from a transportation bureaucracy into what we call a mobility company. And in doing that, we want to act not like a business but as a business," said Kempton. "We have to take a complete review of all the things we do and how we are doing them," said Kempton. Frankly I want to see where we can take the Division of Rail, the Division of Mass Transportation, and the Division of Aeronautics."

"I'm proposing to have workshops with the divisions invite everybody in the division to sit down with management, myself and have a brainstorming session, and see what we we can do for rail service, for mass transit, and what we can do to expand our effectiveness in dealing with our customer base," said Kempton.

"What can we do that we are not doing? There are things we can do that bring the system together, that help make the interoperability work better, so you can buy one ticket in San Luis Obispo and ride all the way to San Bernardino," said Kempton. "Those are the kinds of things that I want to try to take [in] this Department ... [and] move forward."

Kempton closed by saying he wanted to "thank the leadership of TRAC for all you are doing. You are a very dedicated group and I have known about you for some time. I think that you have added a good deal of importance to the debate in Sacramento on transportation." Kempton asked TRAC to "keep in touch" as it develop ideas of mutual concern.

A photoessay on the California Rail 2020 Conference and Excursion is available at www.trainweb.org/carl/TRAC2006

Coast Observations

MEASURE R IN SONOMA AND MARIN Counties, to fund construction of the SMART commuter rail service alongside snarled 101, achieved a supermajority in Sonoma, but the slim majority it achieved in Marin failed the overall 2-county requirement of 2/3 by a margin of barely over a thousand votes. Backers plan to put the plan up on the 2008 Presidential ballot, when it may have a better chance... MEASURE D IN SANTA BARBARA County, to fund a combination of road and commuter rail improvements along Highway 101, also failed its required super-majority passage... HEARINGS BY THE Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission in Los Angeles February 22 and 23 are an opportunity for activists to revive national rail policy from the limbo it has been in for the past 50 years or more. Matt Rose of BNSF is a member... THE HIGH SPEED RAIL AUTHORITY at its December meeting voted to award contracts for environmental analyses on two segments of the proposed high-speed rail line. The joint venture of Hatch Mott McDonald and URS & Arup won Palmdale to Los Angeles work, while STV obtained the L.A. to Orange County contract... BRITISH PRIVATIZATION didn't end high subsidies on corridor service. Since 2002-03, Virgin Rail has received more than £1.5 billion (\$3.0 billion) to subsidize its West Coast Main Line service and is in line to receive £1.4 billion (\$2.8 billion) in the next five years. Virgin hopes to raise route ridership from 20 million a year to 30 million a year over the period... DEFENDERS OF VIRGIN point to the botched £8.6 billion (\$17.4 billion) rebuild of the line (in which several familiar American contractors participated) as being the underlying problem that drove track access costs so high that a subsidy is required. On the East Coast Main Line, for example, operator Great North Eastern Railways will pay £1.3 billion (\$2.5 million) for the franchise over the same period... BIPARTISAN AMTRAK BILL IS BACK: Senators Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ), Trent Lott (R-MS), Daniel Inouye (D-HI) and Ted Stevens (R-AK) relaunched the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act as S.294. The bill reauthorizes Amtrak and creates a new state/federal partnership for passenger rail development. This bill allows 80/20 matching funds for rail capital, similar to highway matches. Changes from the 2005 version that passed the Senate 93-6 include an update to the authorization years to FY08-12, and addition of the Commerce Committee's rail security package... ORANGE COUNTY APPROVED an extension of Measure M, the sales tax dedicated to transportation projects, by a margin of 68.5%. The new measure would collect \$11.9 billion in taxes through 2041. Critics complained that there was too much money for buses and rail, 25%, the same rate as the original measure. New Metrolink rail cars are scheduled to be delivered in 2009 and improvements in Orange County Metrolink service are expected as soon as the equipment passes operational testing... STOCKTON-SAN JOSE SERVICE frequency on Altamont Commuter Express will increase because San Joaquin County residents voted through a sales tax boost...