

# California Rail News

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## HSR Highjacked for Sprawl

### IS SPECULATION PUSHING LINE TO LOS BANOS AND MOJAVE DESERT?

Legislators have drafted four competing bills to head off the high-speed rail bond measure slated for the November ballot, as controversy about Bay Area-Merced and Bakersfield-Santa Clarita route segments continues to build. The debate no longer is whether to delay the bond, but how to inject sensible planning into the half-baked project. Critics predict that without a major redesign, the project "dies of its own numbers."

Environmentalists fear high speed rail has been hijacked for "dumb growth." On segments adjoining the Bay Area and Los Angeles basin, route choices seem to have been made on the basis of improving the marketability of marginal land, which otherwise might not see development for decades. In each case, speed of operation has been traded off to aid land speculation.

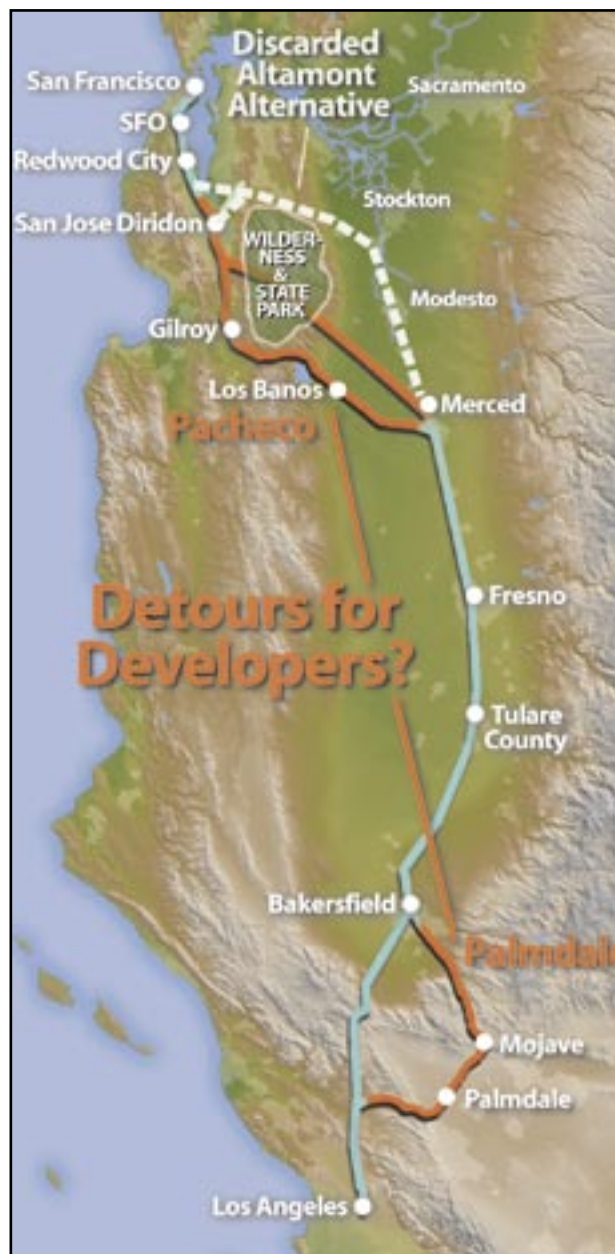
The Planning and Conservation League, the Sierra Club and other key environmental groups say removal of Altamont from the plan ruined the chances of a successful high speed rail project by eliminating its most convincing environmental benefits. Instead of a project that would have provided relief for Interstate 80, 680 and 580 gridlock and pollution, high-speed rail has become a destructive project that would blast through Henry Coe State Park or put massive new development around Gilroy and Los Banos.

"The Rail Authority's decision to listen to the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) staff and push Pacheco Pass is an arrogant and destructive distortion of the good work done by the prior High Speed Rail Commission" said TRAC Board Member Dan McNamara. "What the high speed project lost with that decision is support from the Bay Area environmental community, five key urban counties, and existing commuters."

"The project doesn't provide the traffic benefits of the former plan," said McNamara.

"All they got is support from developers who want to build adjoining wetlands in the west Valley. Frankly, the environmental problems are so severe there shouldn't ever be a Los Banos greenfields station or any development of San Jose suburbs there."

Project critics also have focused attention on the apparent participation of High-Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) staff in activities that might boost a Merced County real estate bubble. Their statements appear calculated to create perceptions that rail maintenance or construction facilities might be sited in Los Banos, Atwater, or Chowchilla.



Both Executive Director Mehdi Morshed and staff member Carry Pourvehidi were quoted in separate Merced Sun-Star articles this year to the effect that rail maintenance bases might be located in the County. Morshed earlier promoted the rail project in talks as "The New California Gold Rush."

"The act of jumping over two counties to make Los Banos or Merced your first stop outside the Bay Area really manipulates market perceptions," said McNamara. "San Joaquin and Stanislaus Counties have gridlocked traffic on Interstate 580 that would benefit from an Altamont route. Los Banos would just produce leapfrog growth."

Meanwhile, Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB) subcontractor Rusty Areias, a former state legislator from Los Banos, has denied any prior knowledge of the fact that the proposed Los Banos station was to be sited by PB on his family's former acreage. The staff work resulting in realignment of the Pacheco alternative five miles southward and the siting of the station appears to have happened during the same ten month period in late

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BART PICKS FIGHT WITH SAN MATEO

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HSRA'S TUBULAR SURF PROPOSAL

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