

# Morshed Proposes Tubing the Surfliners

by Alan C. Miller

The High-Speed Rail Authority issued a report in December proposing that the coast-hugging Surfliners be put on an underground route at a likely cost of billions of dollars. The most frequent reaction of rail passengers is outrage. The second is hilarity.

The Los Angeles-San Diego "LOSSAN" Corridor is not only California's most popular routes, but one of the most scenic rail journeys in the world. If the trains are put in tunnels, millions of passengers would be deprived of this beauty to benefit a few thousand rich and powerful homeowners.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) wants a way to San Diego, because it needs votes from San Diego County on its proposed \$9.9 billion bond measure. Yet San Diego won't be part of Phase 1 of the high-speed rail project; it will be in a later phase envisioned to be funded by the operating profits of Phase 1.

This is a valid approach, assuming the system is built to standards which allow the realization of an operating profit. Even so, the Authority's plan is to route high-speed trains inland via Riverside and Escondido. Environmental and community concerns have all but killed the idea of 200 mph trains on the coast.

So, why did the HSRA release a draft screening report for conventional trains on the same corridor last year? According to this report, Caltrans is "financing the portion of the Authority's technical studies that pertain to non-electric (conventional) rail improvements in the LOSSAN corridor."

Consulting firm IBI has been studying improvements on the LOSSAN corridor for a 20-year outlook, which may include high-speed rail transfers at Los Angeles and Irvine, the envisioned southern terminus of electrified service.

Caltrans plans for double tracking in the corridor have caused much controversy in towns such as Santa Ana, San Juan Capistrano, Dana Point, San Clemente and Del Mar. Santa Ana backed down recently when the city approved an agreement for \$1.6 million in improvements such as decorative fencing and double-pane windows on nearby homes.

High-income residents of the other four cities will not be so easily placated. San Juan Capistrano, Dana Point and San Clemente have formed a tri-city coalition to fight any plans for double-tracking. The Orange County *Register* reported in May 2003 that HSRA voted to drop the double-tracking option in favor of inland tunnels.

Caltrans, responsible for operations in the Corridor, released a Strategic Plan for the corridor in November, based on the same study by IBI. Much of the improvements focus on additional-track options which offer cost-effective speed and reliability benefits. The long-planned tunnel bypass of Rose Canyon is shown to offer very significant performance improvements.

However, the interest in tunnels at five meetings held by HSRA along the Corridor

was primarily to aid the purpose of moving the tracks away from the beaches and view homes—thus the exceptionally high turnout in San Clemente. Resident concerns centered on property values, horn noise and pedestrian safety. The solution most favored was to get the tracks off the beach and into a tunnel under I-5. The HSRA pandered to the crowd with a finding that removing the tracks from the coast was the best solution.

Former HSRA Executive Director Mehdi Morshed stated in a March 2003 Los Angeles Times article that the goal for the corridor is to get from Los Angeles to San Diego in 60 to 80 minutes. The current time is approximately 165 minutes. The HSRA report states that one of the key provisions of its report is that only conventional diesel technology be considered, yet gives no reason why. Is shaving ninety minutes off the schedule feasible using diesel technology? The 60 to 80 minutes translates to a 100 to 130 mph **average** speed, where a 47 mph average currently exists. How could a few tunnels and several miles of new double track multiply the speeds on this route?

The Los Angeles Times reported that the developer of the Marblehead bluff-top development in San Clemente was concerned that after years of working with the Coastal Commission, the HSRA now proposed a tunneling option that would pass right under his project. "This is ridiculous, the two state agencies don't even talk," a Marblehead development spokesman said in the Times. Some observers note that although Caltrans and the HSRA officially cooperated on the report, relations between these agencies on this jurisdiction are far from warm.

"The Authority contracted with IBI to study the future needs of the LOSSAN corridor," said Warren Weber, Chief of the Caltrans Rail Division. "We supplemented this funding for their study." Mr. Weber noted that at this time there is no identified funding for any of these projects, and virtually all capital projects not already under construction in the corridor had been shelved for the foreseeable future.

"In fact," he noted, "even the high-speed rail bond, should it be on the ballot and pass, would not fund any of the proposed tunnels. Of the \$900 million allocated to connecting rail services, only about \$50 million would be available for the LOSSAN corridor."

"With that kind of money," Weber said, "we would double track where we could, but construction money on the proposed tunnels probably won't be seen anytime soon." The only hope, he said, would be federal recognition of an extreme traffic situation bringing in big dollars some day.

Why should scarce transportation dollars be spent to raise property values of southern Orange County residents? Environmental justice advocates who complain of trains supporting only upper-class commuters should really be outraged by the multi-\$100 million

suggestion of tunneling under I-5 so San Clemente can have unfettered beach access.

There are signs the Authority may not be succeeding in the state's far south. The North County Times editorialized in January against the project, noting that any interest in high-speed rail which threatens the vote on a local transit initiative would be too great a cost to pay for the region. San Diego just won't be on the high-speed rail map anytime soon.

While the authority claims some vague jurisdiction over the LOSSAN corridor by holding public meetings and telling the south coast residents what they want to hear, Caltrans goes on with the actual duty of running the railroad and making improvements as it can. Mr. Weber notes that the Strategic Plan is the first step in an environmental document on the corridor that Caltrans will release this summer. Realities of the San Clemente to San Juan Capistrano section have caused Caltrans to rethink corridor improvements. "Politically and environmentally, we can't build a second track in this area," says Weber.

There are legitimate concerns about various segments of the present alignment. There is a potential for landslides along the cliffs south of Del Mar. A very narrow right of way though San Juan Capistrano poses speed problems, and environmentally sensitive wetlands on various portions of the route have to be examined carefully on any rail improvement project.

Some of the proponents of these concerns are very sincere but many others want a private benefit at public expense. No one suggests an increase in their property taxes to help pay for the relocation of a rail line that was in place when they purchased their property. No city has volunteered to float a bond issue to defray the expense. The proponents are quite willing to let the victims of their greed pay the costs.

Relocation of the stations inland would prevent passengers from alighting in the city center. This almost precludes a person without access to a car from using the train for a trip to or from these stations. Caltrans' recent experience with beach buses has shown that a local shuttle is not a solution to maintaining patronage from this segment of riders. If those without cars are disadvantaged, then the relocation may prove to be a case of the rich depriving the poor.

The HSRA, meanwhile needs votes and good PR along the south coast where Phase 1 trains won't run. These residents were told what they wanted to hear from the HSRA. The reality is even the \$10 billion high-speed rail bond won't take the "nuisance" tracks off the beach. The HSRA can "favor" the tunnel options all it wants, and maybe they can fool some of the south coast people some of the time, until the election at least.



**Some homeowners think trains ruin their scenery. Ironically, Surfliner riders have the same view regarding shoreline houses.**