

California Rail News

Volume 19 Number 3

Sacramento, CA

April-May 2006

High-Speed Rail: Dead or Dormant?

**by Alan C. Miller,
TRAC Executive Director**

At the March 22 High-Speed Rail Authority meeting in Oakland, numerous project supporters, including Oakland Mayor and former Governor Jerry Brown, expressed their frustration at state politician's short-sighted priorities and the absolute need for a complete rethink of transportation spending priorities in light of California's exploding population growth and increasing traffic gridlock.

During the recent, and failed, "mega-bond" talks there was a strong sentiment among Capitol politicians that they needed to focus on 'long overdue' highway projects in their districts that could finally be funded by the mega-bond. In our lobbying at the Capitol, TRAC representatives found many high-speed rail believers, but a spattering of disorganized ideas and no leaders willing to step forward to declare the long-term importance of the project and carry it forward. There was a general belief that high-speed rail could be put off.

During the final days of mega-bond negotiations, the content changed daily as the Governor and the Legislature sought a compromise that could pass the 2/3 hurdle. Much of the media attention focused on the surface water debate (new dam construction). Overlooked in the mainstream was \$1 billion placed in the bill by Perata's transportation aid Brian Kelley. This money was to be used for right-of-way purchase and continuation of EIR studies deemed necessary to keep the project moving ahead.

In the final days of negotiations, this money was dropped completely. The final bill contained no high-speed rail money whatsoever. This meant little in the end, however, since the placement of the mega-bond on the June ballot never made it out of the legislature.

The legislature could try again for a mega-bond in November. If so, the deadline would be some time in August. The current thinking is there isn't much enthusiasm for this politically. The Governor's numbers, for inexplicable reasons, are up. The Governor was able to compromise with the Democrats on the mega-bond, but unable to bring along the power brokers in his own party. The same political realities that killed the mega-bond this time would likely be present, if not magnified, in August, closer

to the Gubernatorial election.

Meanwhile, Perata's SB 1024, the 'mere' \$10 billion transportation bond, remains a possibility for November after all the mega-bond talk has faded. The priorities for bonds politically, however, are schools and levees. It is unknown if Perata will try to keep 1024 alive and/or if other types of more specific bonds will find their way onto the November ballot. A windfall of transportation money, be it for highways, transit, intercity rail or high speed rail appears unlikely. [See Bond Update, p.3]

Strangely, amid the lack of enthusiasm for high-speed rail, the \$10 billion bond issue for November currently remains on the ballot. Assembly Member Torrico's AB 713, which calls for it to be moved to 2008, remains dormant since last year. Recently introduced twin bills in the Assembly (AB 1939 Bough, requested by Gov. Schwarzenegger) and the Senate (SB 1493 McClintock) call for the high-speed rail bond to be removed from the November ballot, with no rescheduling for the future--the HSR bond would be terminated.

I recently asked Congressman Jim Costa (D-Fresno), a long-time rail advocate, about high-speed rail at the NARP annual meeting in Sacramento. Since he is now at the national level and there is no apparent leadership for HSR in the state Legislature, I asked him what supporters should do.

Oddly, Costa expressed concern that his own HSR bond, that he had worked on for years, would interfere with the other potential bonds on the November ballot. He said Torrico's bill was not well timed because there was no guarantee that momentum for HSR would be there in 2008. He suggested the best strategy was to get the \$1 billion into the mega-bond (since rejected) to keep the momentum going, and then seek to place a \$15 billion bond issue on the 2010 ballot.

Meanwhile, the Bay Area's Metropolitan Transportation Commission is moving forward on its study of high-speed rail options between the Bay Area and the Valley, part of its rail infrastructure study.

As presented at the March HSRA meeting, a spaghetti-chart of route options are under consideration for Altamont, a pair of route options on the east-side of Pacheco, including one through the fragile wetlands and another that bends north and east before turning south. The most positive

news is that all options through, over and around Henry Coe State Park (the "Straw Man" route) have been dropped.

This MTC study will be completed later in the year and will include a new ridership study that will include commute trips from Sacramento and the San Joaquin Valley to the Bay Area (the lack of which was one of TRAC's major criticisms of the previous study). A full public hearing process will occur before a final route decision is made. The MTC study will only give options and analysis--the HSRA will make the final decision on the route.

Though it will take a 2/3 legislative vote to remove the HSR bond from the November ballot, the lack of leadership in the Capitol on the issue of rail and the lack of vocal support by gubernatorial candidates makes the outlook grim. Many observers believe the worst possible outcome would be that the measure stays on the ballot and fails due to lack of an organized campaign.

California has already overtaken Texas and Florida in the amount of money wasted *not* building high-speed rail.

INSIDE

PAGE 3
COAST
OBSERVATIONS

PAGE 4
LONG WINTER ENDS
ON THE CAPITOLS

PAGE 6
LOS ANGELES RAIL
GETS NEW START

TRAC
Train Riders
Association
of California

1008 Tenth Street, #276
Sacramento, CA 95814

Return Service Requested

MEMBERS, PLEASE CHECK
THE RENEWAL DATE ABOVE
YOUR NAME AND RENEW YOUR
MEMBERSHIP IF THE DATE IS
APPROACHING OR PAST

Non-profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Sacramento, CA
Permit #811