

# CONCERN ABOUT TERMINAL SANS TRACK IN SAC

## FINALLY FULLY FUNCTIONAL - DEPOT MAY SOON BE TORN APART

by Richard F. Tolmach & Alan C. Miller

In the 1920s the Sacramento City Council voted to have the Southern Pacific build its new train depot closer to downtown. When completed in 1926, the new depot was located about a city block closer to downtown than the old "Arcade Station." The new alignment paralleled Seventh Street from the east and turned west to parallel "I" Street. The previous line for the old station, which ran a direct diagonal across this curve, was retained for freight traffic until it was removed to make way for the Interstate 5 freeway viaduct several decades past. State engineers were concerned that having the strategic highway so close to a curve on the freight main would render the freeway's columns vulnerable to a derailment. Since then all freight traffic has passed through the station platforms.

Regional Transit light rail trains are expected to finally reach the existing depot in the fall. The extended construction for this and rebuilding of the parking lot and bus zone will be completed later this year. Nightmarish parking-related traffic jams and passenger platform-to-depot construction detours, which have harmed ridership, will finally end. Capitol passengers will be able to park free at remote light-rail stations along the I-50 corridor and take a single light-rail train to the depot for a cross-platform transfer to the Bay Area. Passengers from the Bay Area will be able to take an easy walk to downtown as the 1920's City Council envisioned, or make a cross-platform transfer to light rail to take them a block from the State Capitol or even directly into the heart of historic Folsom. After years of a blighted, dysfunctional station, the intermodal terminal will be fully functional and passenger-friendly.

Just as soon as the potential for the historic depot / platform complex has been completed and fully realized, the depot tracks may be ripped out and relocated to their pre-1920's location. The result will render the cross-platform transfer broken, the distance from the historic depot to the platforms will be increased by hundreds of feet, and passengers will have to endure what could be a decade or more of new construction. Why?

### Adjacent Development Drives Depot Design

With the large-scale land development of the old Southern Pacific Shop area and the ever-resurfacing idea of a downtown sports arena, the City of Sacramento must consider how to organize its new Sacramento Intermodal Transportation Facility (SITF). A multi-modal terminal study led by a high-priced architectural firm identified technical problems for rail at Sacramento's Southern Pacific Depot. The

controversial verdict of hired experts was to replace the historic curve and platform with rail facilities further from downtown and the depot, ironically to virtually the same alignment that the 1920's City Council deemed too far away.

The current and future needs of rail passengers should be the primary design consideration, with the development designed around these needs. Many observers believe the land-development is pushing rail passengers further from downtown so the triangle of land between the former and current alignments can be incorporated into the downtown street grid without the current rails in the way, increasing railroad and developer profits. Are City leaders failing to recognize the important role rail will play in this region's transportation as gas prices show no sign of going any direction but up?

The consultant's study process was launched with a public relations campaign to raise community expectations, citing the need for a new multimodal terminal built to 'higher technical standards'. The station faces the removal of fully functional facilities used today by commuter or intercity rail, with no prospect of a financially feasible replacement in the foreseeable future. One claim is that station platforms cannot be built on a curve, even though only the longest trains reach the curve and the current alignment has successfully served rail passengers for 80 years. Many passenger stations are sited on curves including those at Davis, Suisun, Fremont, and Martinez. Furthermore, Sacramento project consultants evoked the specter of 9/11 terrorism by making the unsubstantiated claim that a 'secure' subway to future platforms was necessary so passengers would pass through security screening to reach their train. This is pure fantasy; no laws requiring this are on the books nor are other stations being built to such standards.

### If Tracks Move, Will the Depot?

Sacramento's depot problem has the hallmarks of land value manipulation, public funding of private developer gain and lack of progress for rail. Sacramento's curve on passenger-only tracks was no problem for freights until Southern Pacific abandoned its freight line, but at that time only two Amtrak trains used the depot. Today 32--and soon 40--passenger trains will use the station tracks on weekdays. Along with freight movements forced through the depot due to lack of a bypass, this totals approximately sixty daily movements. Freights are delayed by passengers and passengers inconvenienced--even placed in harm's way--by freight traffic.

The freight bypass should have been reinstalled years ago--a quarter mile of track on an open alignment. The use of this bypass would move freights out of the depot area as soon as it is built, improving rail operations and passenger safety. Union Pacific and their development partners may not want to see this bypass installed, as the current conflict between passengers, passenger trains and freight trains are used as an excuse as to the 'need' to move all tracks. The daily depot dance between passengers and freight trains thus continues.

Only the Union Pacific Railroad and its developer friends would benefit from tearing apart the Sacramento Amtrak depot via removal of its tracks. Activists say federal and state environmental laws requiring all feasible alternatives to be studied are being ignored. The City of Sacramento's Notice of Preparation (NOP) of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the Thomas Enterprises development project inaccurately characterizes proposed plans for the site by failing to report the key fact that relocation of the Union Pacific Railroad tracks is a requirement for their development plans to proceed. Relocation will remove the tracks from the existing Sacramento station, the Amtrak station with the highest ridership and revenue in northern California.

The track move would have a negative impact upon rail passenger access to downtown Sacramento, making it further by foot from Amtrak trains and impairing the ability of the existing historic structure to serve as the Amtrak station. This appears to be a significant Federal Section 8 historic resources impact, but the City of Sacramento appears to be attempting to improperly delay a NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) study of the issue until after the track move is completed. Although NEPA was mentioned by the City at the scoping meeting, the NOP fails to mention it, leading project critics to believe that there is an attempt to avoid NEPA's higher level of analysis by moving the tracks before a NEPA study is initiated.

In 2005 the City Council, consultants and activists finally settled on a preferred plan for the depot and passenger platforms. The current tracks would be removed and the passenger platforms built in the middle of the freight rails along a path similar to the old freight alignment. A 'temporary' station would serve as the station until the historic depot was moved a block north. The biggest flaw in the Sacramento plan, however, appears to be the idea that the 50,000 square foot, 1926 brick-veneer-on-early-concrete

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