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High-speed rail may not spark old California magic

By Jamie Goldberg
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Sixty years ago, some alchemy of political will and public support to do big things brought California momentous water, highway and public education projects. That same resolve, let alone the magic, is nowhere to be found today as the state tries desperately to begin construction on a high-speed rail project that has only gone backward in the four years since voters gave it the nod.

What voters approved, by the narrowest of margins, was a plan that earmarked \$9 billion in bonds for a bullet train to connect San Francisco and Los Angeles through the Central Valley by 2020. The total cost was pegged at \$40 billion. Then came land development that left the train's route in question, the economic collapse and, finally, a ham-handed attempt by the High-Speed Rail Authority to lobby legislators to approve funding. By last October, the rail authority was projecting the cost at \$98 billion and delaying completion until 2035.

"It may have been unrealistic to expect that a relatively small organization with little staffing could suddenly transform themselves into an organization capable of conceiving, developing, financing and operating a multibillion-dollar transportation system," said state Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, chairman of the budget subcommittee overseeing transportation.

While part of the increased costs might reflect inflation, Simitian is not convinced that inflation alone would necessitate such a dramatic increase. Hoping to trim costs and gain legislative support, Gov. Jerry Brown, who is a primary backer of the project, appointed his trusted adviser Dan Richard as chairman of the authority this year, to steer it out of embarrassment.

What might be the final hope for the project rests on the High-Speed Rail Authority's latest revised business plan, which will be revealed this week and will likely shave the cost by asking the state to use existing tracks for portions of the rail line. State lawmakers will discuss whether to approve \$2.7 billion in bonds on Thursday.

But it is unlikely that even a more sober business plan will get the project going anytime soon. Without private investments to guarantee that tracks in the Central Valley ultimately connect to tracks in Northern and Southern California, opponents will remain skeptical. Plus, many critics simply think the money is better spent someplace else.

While President Obama has continued to back the project, and the federal government has already promised \$3.3 billion, neither the House nor the Senate has approved high-speed rail funds in transportation budgets this year, and the Government Accountability Office has begun to examine concerns surrounding the project.

Back in Sacramento, Democrats as well as Republicans have simply grown weary of the project's continued complications. State Sen. Doug LaMalfa, R-Richvale (Butte County), who is running for a congressional seat in a Republican-registration-heavy northern portion of the Central Valley where high-speed rail is not popular, and former Rep. George Radanovich are behind an initiative to kill the project. They must collect signatures from 5 percent of registered voters - 504,760 - to qualify for the November ballot.

Other Republicans want to see a lower price, private investment and a plan to break ground in California's most-populated areas rather than building an initial segment from sparsely populated Fresno to Bakersfield with no guarantee that the project would be continued.

Lance Simmens, the High-Speed Rail Authority's deputy director of communications, argues that construction in the Central Valley is a crucial foundation so that when funding becomes available to connect the Central Valley to Los Angeles or San Francisco, "some generation" will be able to take advantage of the groundwork - an assertion that would not sit well with opponents.

Democrats, like Simitian, state Sen. Alan Lowenthal of Long Beach, chairman of the Select Committee on High-Speed Rail, and Sen. Mark DeSaulnier of Concord, chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, were among the most vocal opponents to the current business proposal but are expected to support the modified plan.

Simitian has called on the High-Speed Rail Authority to consider a less-expensive, less-disruptive plan that improves existing rail structures instead of creating brand-new railways. A blended system that uses existing railways like Caltrain is expected to be a key component of the new proposal. "It will help make a high-speed rail a reality sooner, and it will also shave considerable amounts of money off of the total cost of the project," Simmens said.

Maybe. But that still leaves the project without private investment, something that Bill Bird, spokesman for Senate Republican leader Bob Huff, said is problematic.

Plus, the magic of the 1950s and '60s might just be gone. Environmental regulations and the need to build through cities have slowed infrastructural progress. But the biggest difference is the state just doesn't have the same revenue stream it used to have from property taxes, said Gray Brechin, a historical geographer and founder of California's Living New Deal Project.

"California used to be the vanguard," Brechin said. "Now, we can't do what Europe has done for decades. It's a measure of how far behind we've fallen."

California has truly entered the "era of limits" that Gov. Brown touted during his first term, said Jack Pitney, political science professor at Claremont McKenna College. At a time when California is cutting back on higher education and pensions, there is simply no will to support a project with such elusive future benefits, he added.

"I don't know if this project will ever make sense," Pitney said. "But right now, the most serious policymakers are not enthusiastic about embracing a big project."

Jamie Goldberg writes for the California News Service, a project of UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism. Find the California News Service at californianewsservice.org and follow it on Twitter at [@CNSPolitics](https://twitter.com/CNSPolitics). To comment, go to sfgate.com/chronicle/submissions/#1.