

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Being smarter about high-speed rail in California: Tom Daly and Laura Friedman



A rendering of California’s high-speed rail train. (Courtesy of California High-Speed Rail Authority)

By [TOM DALY](#) and [LAURA FRIEDMAN](#) |

PUBLISHED: November 7, 2019 at 10:28 p.m. | UPDATED: November 11, 2019 at 8:34 a.m.

There are few phrases in California politics that invoke as much passion as the words “high-speed rail.” The ambitious transportation infrastructure project seeking to move passengers from Los Angeles to San Francisco in two hours and 40 minutes, and ultimately connect San Diego to Sacramento, has become a centerpiece of public debate.

The project has drawn controversy for its significant cost overruns while also inspiring recognition of our real need for viable mass transit in our state. Although the debate around high-speed rail is ongoing in the Capitol, we’d like to explore the realities of the project and ask a question — can we use transit dollars in a smarter way?

The history of California’s high-speed rail project began in 1996 when the Legislature formed the California High-Speed Rail Authority. Nearly a decade later, in 2008, California voters passed Proposition 1A, which authorized the issuance of \$9 billion in bonds for the initial funding of the project.

Construction of the high-speed rail project officially started in Fresno in early 2015. That year the Legislature and then-Gov. Jerry Brown passed a bill allocating 25% of California’s annual cap-and-trade funds towards construction.

We’re highlighting this history to bring attention to two key facts.

First, high-speed rail is the result of efforts spanning more than two decades, with support repeatedly affirmed by the Legislature.

Second, with a current price tag of nearly \$80 billion, there’s a lot of money on the table. Given this enormous expense we suggest that it’s worth exploring ways to get a greater return on our investment.

With minor changes to the Merced to Bakersfield line, such as delaying electrification and reexamining the route, we could save between \$5 and \$6 billion. Those billions could instead be invested in other rail projects, including crucial projects between Burbank and Anaheim, which could create a much more efficient rail system.

Greater investment in trains running from Burbank to Anaheim will help millions of riders get where they need to go quickly. The cost savings could also translate to significantly lower ticket prices for riders. In the process, we could take thousands of cars off the road every day — making life easier for everyone along that span of Interstate 5.

Metrolink already services 1.8 million riders annually, with 30-minute intervals during peak hours. Metrolink recently suggested that that an investment along the lines of what we are proposing can double the ridership with new, high-speed electric trains. Greater frequency, fewer delays and faster service. As a result, more people could rely on Metrolink for their transportation needs.

We are considering high-speed rail projects at a time when air quality across the state, particularly in the South Coast basin, is getting worse.

One of the original intentions behind bringing electrified high-speed rail to California was to decrease transportation's impacts on air quality and greenhouse gas emissions. This would be achieved by reducing car dependency, traffic congestion and the long commutes between affordable housing and job centers. Investing in urban population centers such as Los Angeles and the Bay Area is a more effective way to achieve these goals.

What we're proposing isn't to replace high-speed rail, but to be smarter about how we spend public funds on passenger rail service overall.

This proposal is in the early stages, but it is something we'd like you to think about. A \$5 billion investment that has a bigger bang for every single dollar in terms of ridership, affordability for consumers and emission reductions is an opportunity the state should seriously consider.

Tom Daly represents California's 69th Assembly District. Laura Friedman represents the 43rd Assembly District.

<https://www.ocregister.com/>