

# Los Angeles Times

## Editorial: It's now or never to save California's bullet train



Construction of California's high-speed rail project in Fresno, Calif., in 2018.

(Los Angeles Times)

By [THE TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD](#)

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Infrastructure mega-projects that [run wildly over budget](#) and far past their deadline for completion all tend to suffer from the same fundamental problem: optimism bias. That's the tendency to underestimate the challenges in building huge, complex public works and to overestimate the benefits those projects will deliver.

California's struggle to build the bullet train between Los Angeles and San Francisco is a classic case of optimism bias.

From the beginning, its proponents vastly oversimplified the complexity of the project and underestimated the expense. That is why the once \$33-billion project is now estimated to cost \$80 billion or more to complete. With each update, the project is slated to cost more and deliver less than voters were promised in 2008.

But it's not too late to consider alternatives that might help keep high speed rail on track. Last week, lawmakers took the strongest action to date to try to pause or even reset the project.

The Assembly passed a resolution demanding that the High Speed Rail Authority not award key contracts to build the Central Valley segment of the system, which would use up the remaining \$4.2 billion in voter-approved bonds for the project, until the Legislature approves the funding for them.

Assembly leaders argue this is their [last chance](#) to weigh in on the direction of the bullet train. They're right to worry. The authority — which is a state agency responsible for building the train system — is getting ready to award the largest contract in its history to install 171 miles of track and the accompanying electrical system, plus a 30-year maintenance agreement. It plans to ask the Legislature for the funding afterwards.

Signing the contract would make it nearly impossible for lawmakers to consider alternative ways to build the bullet train. Among those alternatives is [a proposal](#) supported by Southern California lawmakers to delay installing the electrical system in the Central Valley and instead run diesel trains on the new tracks. They would use the temporary savings to invest in commuter rail lines elsewhere in California, which could increase ridership and enthusiasm for routes that will eventually become part of the high-speed rail system.

One problem with this proposal is that it's little more than an idea. No one has put forth an actual plan. There's no study on how improving commuter rail first would affect ridership. There's been no examination of the proposal's potential effect on greenhouse gas emissions, although it seems clear that delaying electrified rail in the Central Valley would be a disappointing backslide on California's ambitious climate goals. Nor is there a legal analysis on whether the state can reorder construction priorities and shift money from the Central Valley without violating the requirements of the federal grants or [Proposition 1A](#), the 2008 voter-approved bond measure.

As of now, the rail authority and the Newsom administration show no interest in studying the alternatives. They're plowing ahead with [the current plan](#) to spend the state's remaining money to run fast electric trains from Bakersfield to Merced as a proving ground for the larger project and as fulfillment of their promise to the Central Valley. They argue that changing course could violate the requirements of federal grants and embolden the Trump administration to try to claw back the money, which is a legitimate fear.

Still, the [legislative analyst](#) and a [panel of experts](#) overseeing the project have raised concerns that the authority is, again, using optimistic assumptions about the costs and complexities of the current plan. They warn that the project may need more money just to finish this first segment, which may not serve as many riders as the authority predicts. Plus, nobody knows yet how the state will come up with the money to build the rest of line from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

We've said repeatedly that abandoning high-speed rail would be a tragic mistake for California, for the U.S. and for the planet. But it's also apparent that the project is at risk of collapsing under the weight of unrealistic promises and expectations. This is the right moment for state leaders to pause and consider what the best way forward is for this ambitious project, which is supposed to be the backbone of a fast, clean mass-transportation system connecting urban centers across the state. The question isn't whether the bullet train should be built, but rather how to get it built.