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Schwarzenegger quietly quashed effort to improve commuter rails

The governor ordered officials to seek federal money only for the proposed bullet train between San Francisco and San Diego. Rail advocates say the commuter line upgrades should take priority.



A rider boards a Metrolink train at L.A.'s Union Station. Agency officials had hoped to use high-speed rail stimulus funds to improve braking systems. (Gina Ferazzi / Los Angeles Times)

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By Dan Weikel and Eric Bailey

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Reporting from Sacramento and Los Angeles - Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger quietly spiked an effort last month to win \$1.1 billion in federal high-speed rail stimulus funds for 29 projects to improve the safety, speed and capacity of heavily traveled commuter corridors through Southern California.

Instead, he ordered state officials to seek money for only one project -- the proposed bullet train between San Francisco and San Diego.

The governor's decision was intended to increase the state's chances of receiving high-speed rail money, officials said. California is competing with more than 40 applicants from 23

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But the action has sparked debate among rail advocates about whether too high a priority is being placed on the high-speed train project at the expense of the second-busiest rail corridor in the nation, where budget-strapped commuter services have been trying to improve safety, add track and cut travel times from San Diego to Santa Barbara.

Eliminated from the state application for federal funds was almost \$170 million for positive train control -- computer-guided braking systems designed to prevent collisions and

allow conventional trains to safely travel at 110 mph. Such automated systems, which the federal government wants installed by 2015, would have prevented the Metrolink crash in Chatsworth last year that killed 25 people in the worst rail accident in modern California history.

Also removed was \$969 million in railroad crossing improvements, track additions, overpasses and a variety of maintenance projects designed to benefit the busy corridor between San Diego and Los Angeles as well as the main rail line through Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. The routes are used by Amtrak, the Coaster, Metrolink and major freight lines such as Union Pacific and Burlington Northern Santa Fe.

One major goal of commuter rail services has been to reduce the travel time between San Diego and Los Angeles from about three hours to two hours.

"I am not happy about it," said Art Brown, chairman of the government authority that oversees the Los Angeles-San Diego corridor. "There were lots of projects in the application to improve intracity rail service. The system will remain a slow-speed service, and safety has been one of our big concerns."

The California Department of Transportation's rail division, which had worked with transportation agencies in Southern California to prepare the application, was ready to submit the paperwork to Washington by the Oct. 2 deadline.

But Schwarzenegger quashed the request and told state officials to only seek \$4.7 billion in federal rail stimulus funds for the high-speed train project to bolster its chances of getting funding.

Under the federal economic stimulus plan, about \$8 billion is available for high-speed train projects, which can include conventional rail improvements to increase train speeds. The federal Department of Transportation is expected to decide which projects to fund by January.

Planners say the high-speed network would ultimately cost at least \$45 billion and stretch nearly 800 miles from San Diego to San Francisco, with a branch running to Sacramento. Trains would exceed 200 mph on some stretches, prompting officials to say that a trip between Los Angeles and San Francisco could take as little as two hours and 38 minutes.

In the days after learning that Caltrans was pressing ahead with its request to seek money for local projects, members of the California High Speed Rail Authority pushed the governor to keep the focus on winning funding for the bullet train.

Anaheim Mayor Curt Pringle, chairman of the authority's board, talked with the governor by phone. The effort was aided by David Crane, a gubernatorial advisor who also is a high-speed rail board member.

Pringle said that state applications for federal money already ask for more than \$1 billion for conventional rail projects -- money that would come from a different pool of economic stimulus funds. About a third of the request -- \$390 million -- is for rail corridors in Southern California, state records show.

"California is in the lead position to receive high-speed rail funding," Pringle said in a recent interview. "We should not be competing with ourselves."

Pringle and Crane found a ready audience in Schwarzenegger, who is a big backer of the state's push to be first in the nation with a 200-mph train line, a project that could create up to 130,000 jobs.

"The governor's goal was to submit the most highly competitive application possible to ensure that California receives as much funding as possible," said Camille Anderson, a Schwarzenegger

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spokeswoman. "California's competitive edge is without question high-speed rail."

Critics say the corridor between San Diego and Santa Barbara was denied an unprecedented opportunity to fund a variety of long-awaited projects in order to favor what they view as a flawed high-speed rail proposal that is surrounded by uncertainty, duplicates some existing service and is decades from completion.

They say the bullet-train project is years from breaking ground and that important conventional rail improvements would be delayed because they wouldn't get enough funding from other federal or state sources.

The governor "took shovel-ready projects and put them aside," said Rich Tolmach, president of the California Rail Foundation. "Hundreds of millions of dollars were thrown away. Now these rail projects will not get their fair share of federal stimulus money."

Tolmach and other critics said the Caltrans rail division and other transportation agencies would try to seek alternate funding, but those sources are not as large as the federal funds allocated for high-speed rail, and the state has little money because of an unprecedented and ongoing budget shortfall.

"We may never get this money now," said Jim Mills, a former state senator who helped to create commuter rail service between San Diego and Los Angeles. "The lives of rail travelers will be jeopardized by this. One of the major items requested was positive train control, which can prevent the kind of accidents that have occurred on Metrolink."

However, Richard Katz, a former assemblyman who sits on the Metrolink, high-speed rail and Metropolitan Transportation Authority boards, was more optimistic that conventional rail projects, such as positive train control, would not be jeopardized by the governor's concentration on high-speed rail.

For example, Katz said, Metrolink, which serves six counties, needs roughly \$200 million to \$210 million to install positive train control by 2012.

About \$70 million has been requested from other federal sources, and efforts are underway to try to redirect \$97 million from state transportation bonds that are earmarked to rebuild the Colton railroad crossing.

If positive train control cannot get enough federal or state funding, Katz said he believes the MTA would lend Metrolink the money.

"We are still in good shape overall," Katz said. "We're applying for everything we can get our hands on. I think we will do well in all our funding requests."

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