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From the Los Angeles Times

THE STATE

High-speed rail system may be derailed

Schwarzenegger moves to slash funding for the system, citing other transportation needs.

By Marc Lifsher
Times Staff Writer

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SACRAMENTO — For more than a decade, policymakers have debated, studied and scoped out a high-speed rail line that would whisk travelers between downtown Los Angeles and San Francisco in 2 1/2 hours.

But, this year, the \$40-billion dream of building a Japanese- or European-style bullet train through the Central Valley may find itself stopped in its tracks.

Even as state lawmakers visited France earlier this month for a glimpse of a passenger train as it set a world rail speed record of 357 mph, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger was applying the brakes to California's plan for a high-speed system.

The governor wants "to quietly kill this — and not go out and tell the people that high-speed rail isn't in the future," said state Sen. Dean Florez (D-Shafter). The lawmaker from the southern San Joaquin Valley is counting on the trains to help bring jobs to his district.

Schwarzenegger asked the Legislature in his 2007 budget to slash money for the California High-Speed Rail Authority. The governor also wants lawmakers to postpone indefinitely a \$9.95-billion rail bond issue that is slated to appear on the November 2008 ballot.

Adam Mendelsohn, a spokesman for the governor, said Schwarzenegger still wanted to build a bullet train — just not any time soon: "Right now, the voters are crying for relief from congested freeways. That's the immediate priority."

The governor's moves come as the rail authority, which already has cleared its first environmental hurdles, is about to begin some crucial steps, including engineering, right-of-way acquisition and financial planning.

At stake is a 700-mile rail corridor with no potentially dangerous vehicle crossings. It would follow several routes from Sacramento and the San Francisco Bay Area south through Bakersfield to Los Angeles and San Diego.

Rolling along at up to 220 mph, the electricity-powered train would zip passengers between Los Angeles' Union Station and downtown San Francisco as fast as the fastest plane trip, planners say — factoring in the time to get to the airport and go through security.

And commuters could speed from Anaheim to downtown L.A. in 20 minutes, instead of today's 45-minute Metrolink journey.

Critics see the high-speed train as a potential boondoggle that would be a drain on the state treasury and a loser that would never pay for itself. Consider, they say, the poor performance of most long-distance U.S. passenger rail service.

They also note that an effort to build a bullet train system between San Diego and Los Angeles in the early 1980s collapsed after coastal residents balked at environmental problems with a route close to the ocean.

Subsequent attempts to link Southern California and Las Vegas with high-speed rail have failed to gain traction.

Supporters disagree. They cite the train's speed, convenience and its less-controversial route. Backers say that based on ridership estimates, the train could rack up an annual operating surplus of as much as \$2 billion by 2030.

California's bullet trains should wow passengers when they take a ride, said Quentin Kopp, chairman of the High-Speed Rail Authority. "Now, when you say trains, people think of Amtrak. But Amtrak is pitiful."

Although slow, three heavily subsidized Amtrak trains crisscross the state. The routes, operated jointly with the California Department of Transportation, have grown in popularity and in fares collected.

The big increases in the three lines operated by Amtrak and Caltrans have not been shared by Amtrak's Coast Starlight train between the Pacific Northwest, the Bay Area and Los Angeles.

Ridership dropped 34% from 1999 to 2006 on the legendary train that offers dramatic views — and notoriously long delays. The Bay Area-to-Los Angeles portion is scheduled to take just over 11 hours but consistently runs from five to 11 hours late.

For her part, Kathryn Hardy, a daily commuter on Amtrak's lumbering San Joaquins line between Sacramento and Modesto, is more than ready for high-speed rail.

"If it's fast and more on time, people would take it because driving is becoming more and more of a hassle," she said.

"A nice, long train ride is romantic and nostalgic, but it's not what people want," Hardy said as she and hundreds of other passengers on a nearly full San Joaquins crawled through the outskirts of towns at 10 mph and repeatedly stopped for passing freight trains.

Rail travel in California could remain Amtrak-slow for years to come if the governor succeeds in putting off the bond vote, said Jo Linda Thompson, a lobbyist for the Assn. for California High-Speed Trains.

"It would be the kiss of death for the train," she said.

If the Legislature goes along with the governor, it would be the third time a state rail bond has been delayed, and boosters said another postponement could kill the measure for good.

Schwarzenegger, who is gaining an international reputation as an environmentalist, recognizes that a network of high-speed trains could help combat global warming, his spokesman said.

But work on the train should wait for improved highways, new dams and prisons, Mendelsohn said. "There are millions of millions of working families who use freeways and roads in California. It's a reality."

Schwarzenegger's budget would reduce the authority to an office with no more than six full-time employees — without the 75 consulting firms with 300 employees it has now. Outside contracts would need to be canceled, route planning put on hold and environmental and engineering work frozen.

The time is now to make the train a reality, said Assemblywoman Fiona Ma (D-San Francisco), who heads the Legislature's informal "high-speed rail caucus." Ma said her recent ride on the speed-record-setting French train made her a believer.

"It felt like we were ready to take off on a jet, but we kept on going faster," she said just after getting off the train.

Another member of the delegation, Assemblyman Bob Huff (R-Diamond Bar), said high-speed rail would be a good transportation alternative for California, but as a fiscal conservative he was worried about the cost.

Ma's supporters in the Legislature and in local governments want to get Schwarzenegger to change his mind. Failing that, they'll try to allocate about \$100 million for the rail authority that the governor wants eliminated. They also oppose his plan to strike the rail bond proposal from the 2008 ballot.

But a top aide to Schwarzenegger says the governor doesn't want to commit state money before lining up private financing.

Asking voters to approve nearly \$10 billion in state borrowing, without first lining up at least \$20 billion in private capital investments, is like the "tail wagging the dog," said David Crane, a former investment banker whom Schwarzenegger recently appointed to the rail authority board.

High-speed rail advocates agree that they'll need to attract billions of dollars from the private sector. However, they caution that investors are unlikely to risk their money without first seeing state dollars upfront.

"We've got to put enough public investment in to see if there is a system that others find appealing" to invest in, said Anaheim Mayor Curt Pringle, a Republican and another new Schwarzenegger appointee to the rail authority.

However it's financed, the idea of streaking from Sacramento to Southern California in a few hours sounded great to Bill Cullifer and his 16-year-old daughter, Katie, as they slowly cruised through Stockton on a 10-hour train and bus trip to Disneyland.

"We could watch a movie on the train and then we'd be there," Katie said before nodding off to sleep.

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Proposed high-speed train

A proposed high-speed train that would link Northern and Southern California would be competitive with air travel by 2020 and would relieve pressure on air and highway corridors, according to proponents. Here are the proposed routes and estimated door-to-door times between selected cities.

Sample trip Auto Air High-speed train*

Los Angeles to	7 hours,	3 hours,	3 hours,
San Francisco	36 minutes	26 minutes	30 minutes
Fresno to	4 hours,	3 hours	2 hours,
Los Angeles	18 minutes		33 minutes
San Diego to	2 hours	2 hours	2 hours
Los Angeles	41 minutes	46 minutes	16 minutes
Burbank to	6 hours,	3 hours	3 hours
San Jose	32 minutes	8 minutes	2 minutes
Sacramento to	2 hours,	No	1 hour
San Jose	33 minutes	service	53 minutes

* Express times, including travel time to and from train station.

Note: Air travel includes time needed to get to and from airports and to pass through a airport security.

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Source: California High-Speed Rail Authority

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