Biting the bullet (train)

IT doesn't take a traffic engineer to see that California's freeway system is overtaxed and just a few years away from being maxed out. Any motoring Californian instinctively knows this from everyday experience. And the few traffic-relief projects planned or in the works are an ultimately futile hedge against the day when, finally, it really will be quicker to walk.

This fundamental acceptance of the inescapable future will be of great benefit to the state's High-Speed Rail Authority, which has begun pitching its plan for a statewide system of super-fast bullet trains rocketing between San Francisco and San Diego. We all know we must do something radical. Maybe a bullet train is the right answer.

The rub, however, is deep: It costs $40 billion to build, and won't start service for about 15 years.

It's going to be a tough sell, any way you look at it. First, backers must garner enough political support. Depending on how things go, the agency plans to be putting the initial funding - about $10 billion - before voters in 2008.

What makes it harder is that the agency hasn't made it very clear where that money is going to come from other than some vaguely plotted formula of public-private investment.

Nonetheless, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has come out in strong support of the project. Although he criticizes the authority for spending 10 years and $40 million and not drafting a clear financing plan, he rightly recognizes that that oversight shouldn't doom a good idea.

This is welcome, because the bullet-train concept needs financial and political support from the governor and Legislature, or it's likely the train will never get past the concept stage.

Despite its high price tag, the bullet train has many benefits, not the least of which is that it would take cars off the roads. As well, it would be privately run by a company that knows how to turn a profit while providing good service.

And a bullet train could well be the critical link to regionalization of Los Angeles' airports. Though the trains be in direct competition with airlines for in-state travelers, they actually help longer-distance travelers get to Burbank, Palmdale and Ontario airports.

Still, there are many concerns with the bullet train concept. For one, it requires an enormous investment, and returns might not be evident for about 15 years. Though the trains would for the most part rely on existing rail routes and rights of way, the authority would likely have to use eminent domain to acquire many acres of private property adjacent to existing rail lines.

There's no question that high-speed rail works in Europe and Japan, where it has been used for 40 years. But it's not at all sure that the fast train is the silver bullet for Californians' future traffic woes.

We do know, however, that whether California invests in serious transportation projects or not, people are still going to move here and bring cars with them.

And if we don't bite the bullet and provide sufficient funding from next year's budget for the agency to continue with its work, the state may have missed the best chance it has at keeping California moving through the 21st century.