
Labor Weighs In on High Speed Rail Line

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Union members turned out in force for the State Senate Committee hearing on High Speed Rail Jan. 21 in Palo Alto. State Senators Joe Simitian (Palo Alto) and Alan Lowenthal (Long Beach) from the Senate Joint Budget and Transportation committees heard public input from proponents and opponents of siting the rail line on the San Francisco Peninsula. When built, it would move passengers from Los Angeles to the Bay Area at speeds of up to 220 miles per hour.

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Building Trades union members and other supporters pointed out that the project will improve transportation options for all Californians, help improve the environment and reduce oil dependency, and prove a boon to the state's economy, especially in the construction sector. The project will create 160,000 construction jobs, and another 450,000 permanent jobs.

California voters approved Proposition 1-A, the \$10 billion high-speed rail bond measure in 2008, as the state's contribution toward the \$40 billion construction project.

Over 400 union members attended the hearing, including members of Operating Engineers, Machinists, Iron Workers, Laborers, Teamsters, Painters, Elevator Constructors, Flight Attendants and Plumbers.

The Senators heard testimony from Jeffrey Barker and Robert Doty of the California High Speed Rail Authority, who explained their efforts to revise budget projections and ridership estimates in light of a critical analysis of the HSRA's proposals by the Legislative Analyst's Office.

Sen. Alan Lowenthal of Long Beach said he was a supporter of high-speed rail but that the HSRA needed to do a better job building confidence in the project.

Lowenthal said that the state legislature "doesn't do a lot of oversight, but in this case the process has been good." He said he had held hearings in Los Angeles in 2007 and more hearings in 2009 after the 2008 bond was passed. "I support a high-speed rail project that is constructed correctly with no financial risk," he said. Lowenthal called for a realistic financial plan from the HSRA and said the northern California hearing was part of the process of listening to the concerns of the public.

The HSRA touted the benefits of the project, including improvements to the existing CalTrain system through electrification and grade separations, as well as providing jobs. Barker said that the Peninsula region had one of the highest levels of support for Prop 1A in 2008. He said the passage of Prop 1A and the promise of federal stimulus funds had enabled the HSRA to develop a business plan and a timeline. A Congressional committee approved investing \$2.5 billion in high-speed rail in December.

The State Building and Construction Trades Council's Northern California Regional Director Ray Trujillo spoke in support of the project, along with San Mateo County Building Trades Council Business Manager Bill Nack, San Francisco Building Trades Council Executive Secretary-Treasurer Mike Theriault, and Santa Clara County Building Trades Council Executive officer Neil Struthers.

Trujillo said that, "Economic experts agree: California can't compete effectively in the 21st century economy without better, modern transportation. California's overcrowded roads, highways, traditional rail lines, and airports are past capacity. They are slowing down our economy."

He said that high speed rail was working well in France, Germany, and China and their economies are prospering accordingly.

"President Obama has promised major investments in high speed rail. Either California can reap the benefits, or leave them to others," Trujillo said.

Mike Theriault of the SF Building Trades told the Senators that not only would the high-speed rail project provide jobs for construction workers suffering 15 to 30 percent unemployment, but would also provide an economic stimulus beyond the construction jobs.

George Tynan, a member of Operating Engineers Local 3, said the state should look ahead and consider that the benefits of the high speed rail system went beyond the state. "The project is getting federal funding, so it is a federal project," he said. "It could benefit not just California, but could be extended into Oregon and Washington, Arizona and Nevada. It benefits the region with job creation and transportation improvements."

One week after the hearing, the Obama Administration announced that California will receive \$2.25 billion to help build the high-speed rail project — more than one quarter of the \$8 billion in federal stimulus money devoted to creating high-speed rail networks.

The San Francisco Chronicle reported Jan. 28 that a White House document indicated that the \$2.25 billion is for “work (that) will include purchasing right-of-way, constructing track, signaling systems, and stations, and completing environmental reviews and engineering documents” for four segments of the system: San Francisco to San Jose, Merced to Fresno, Fresno to Bakersfield, and Los Angeles to Anaheim.

Anaheim Mayor Curt Pringle, chairman of the California High Speed Rail Authority, said, “This award is fantastic news for California and for our state’s high-speed rail project. This award will go toward specific projects, but it will benefit every single section of our planned high-speed rail system by moving this entire vision closer ... to being the first true high-speed rail system in the United States.”

Assemblymember Cathleen Galgiani, who authored the bond legislation to fund the project, pointed out that with projected population growth in the state, there was a need for improving and expanding transportation systems. She said that if high speed rail was not built, “We’d need another 3,000 miles of freeways, five airport runways, and 90 new gates at airports. We don’t have the space. It is difficult to site a train system but not as difficult as it would be to build new freeways as populations expand.” She pointed out that her bill prohibits any government subsidies for the project. The mix of bond funds, federal funds, private investment, and fares would fund it. She said high-speed rail advocates had met with experts from six countries that have successful high-speed rail systems to help develop plans.

Representatives of Californians for High Speed Rail and other mass transit advocacy groups also spoke and urged the legislators to continue to support the project and act quickly to move it forward. Some said that with other states also applying for federal funds there would be increasing competition and an urgency in putting the project out to bid and starting the engineering and construction.