

Senator Simitian : http://www.senatorsimitian.com/entry/eshoo_simitian_gordon_statement_on_high-speed_rail

April 16, 2011

Since the passage of Proposition 1A in 2008, each of us has expressed our support for “high-speed rail done right,” by which we mean a genuinely statewide system that makes prudent use of limited public funds and which is responsive to legitimate concerns about the impact of high-speed rail on our cities, towns, neighborhoods and homes.

To date, however, the California High Speed Rail Authority has failed to develop and describe such a system for the Peninsula and South Bay. For that reason, we have taken it upon ourselves today to set forth some basic parameters for what “high-speed rail done right” looks like in our region.

We start with the premise that for the Authority to succeed in its statewide mission it must be sensitive and responsive to local concerns about local impacts. Moreover, it is undeniable that funding will be severely limited at both the state and national levels for the foreseeable future.

Much of the projected cost for the San Jose to San Francisco leg of the project is driven by the fact that the Authority has, to date, proposed what is essentially a second rail system for the Peninsula and South Bay, unnecessarily duplicating existing usable infrastructure. Even if such a duplicative system could be constructed without adverse impact along the CalTrain corridor, and we do not believe it can, the cost of such duplication simply cannot be justified.

If we can barely find the funds to do high speed rail right, we most certainly cannot find the funds to do high speed rail wrong.

Accordingly, we call upon the High-Speed Rail Authority and our local CalTrain Joint Powers Board to develop plans for a blended system that integrates high-speed rail with a 21st Century CalTrain.

To that end:

- We explicitly reject the notion of high-speed rail running from San Jose to San Francisco on an elevated structure or “viaduct”; and we call on the High-Speed Rail Authority to eliminate further consideration of an aerial option;
- We fully expect that high-speed rail running from San Jose to San Francisco can and should remain within the existing CalTrain right of way; and,
- Third and finally, consistent with a project of this more limited scope, the Authority should abandon its preparation of an EIR (Environmental Impact Report) for a phased project of larger dimensions over a 25 year timeframe. Continuing to plan for a project of this scope in the face of limited funding and growing community resistance is a fool’s errand; and is particularly ill-advised when predicated on ridership projections that are less than credible.

Within the existing right-of-way, at or below grade, a single blended system could allow high-speed rail arriving in San Jose to continue north in a seamless fashion as part of a 21st Century CalTrain (using some combination of electrification, positive train control, new rolling stock and/or other appropriate upgrades) while maintaining the currently projected speeds and travel time for high-speed rail.

The net result of such a system would be a substantially upgraded commuter service for Peninsula and South Bay residents capable of accommodating high-speed rail from San Jose to San Francisco.

All of this is possible, but only if the High-Speed Rail Authority takes this opportunity to rethink its direction.

Over the course of the past 18 months the Authority has come under considerable criticism from the California Legislative Analyst's Office, the Bureau of State Audits, the California Office of the Inspector General, the Authority's own Peer Review Group and the Institute of Transportation Studies at the University of California at Berkeley. The Authority would do well to take these critiques to heart, and to make them the basis for a renewed and improved effort.

Frankly, a great many of our constituents are convinced that the High-Speed Rail Authority has already wandered so far afield that it is too late for a successful course correction. We hope the Authority can prove otherwise.

An essential first step is a rethinking of the Authority's plans for the Peninsula and South Bay. A commitment to a project which eschews an aerial viaduct, stays within the existing right-of-way, sets aside any notion of a phased project expansion at a later date, and incorporates the necessary upgrades for CalTrain - which would produce a truly blended system along the CalTrain corridor - is the essential next step.