

Please Think Strategically!

CALIFORNIA ONLY HAS A FEW BILLION TO SPEND

By Richard F. Tolmach

California's rail network map isn't a pretty picture. A 65-mile gap separates Metrolink's tracks in Santa Clarita from Amtrak's end of the line in Bakersfield. Amtrak's north-south bus gap is even worse at 105 miles, all the way from L.A. to Bakersfield, and there isn't even an attempt to make *Surfliners* and San Joaquin buses connect. Is this a system?

Trying to use Amtrak's *Surfliner* for access to LAX? Let's talk frustration! Once you get to Union Station you have to connect to the Red Line, then the Blue Line, then an outdoors connection to the Green Line, then a shuttle bus. Missed your flight yet?

The Bay Area has an even worse set of connectivity problems, with Amtrak service landlocked in the East Bay, buses that get caught in Bay Bridge traffic and miss trains, and no trains direct to SFO from north, south, east or west. Ready to rent a car?

Is it any wonder Europeans laugh at us when we say our rail program in California is booming, or we say that trains are better here than they have ever been? Our visitors know perfectly well that conditions on U.S. railways are not only worse than Eastern Europe, they seem to be more like Somalia or Afghanistan.

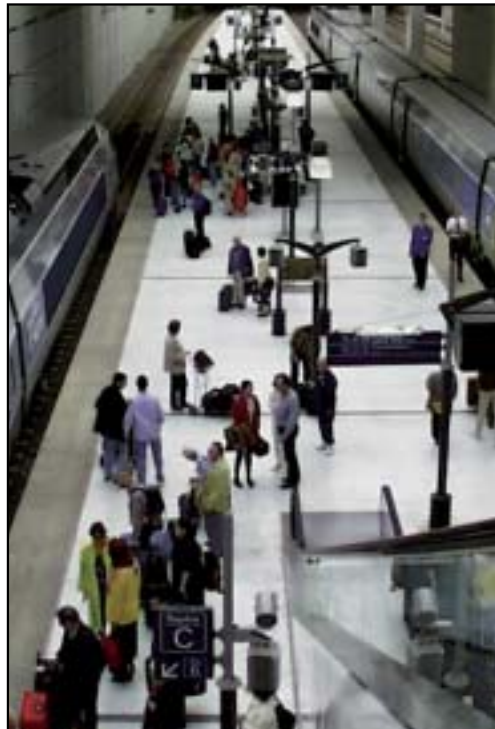
That's why I expect more compelling proposals for rail spending from people like Jerry Meral of the Planning and Conservation League or Gil Mallery of Amtrak-West. They both are well-acquainted with trains, and both have experienced the strategic gaps in our train network. But instead of targeting capital at California's rail network gaps, their draft plans appear to scatter it to the wind.

PCL gives intercity rail barely 5 percent of its proposed ballot measure's budget, less than recent governors have programmed for Amtrak, and fails to list any actual earmarks for rail. It looks like PCL doesn't consider Amtrak or high speed rail a priority anymore. PCL **does** earmark huge sums to programs we all know have failed, such as freeway interchange projects. The PCL bond plan is long on dollars and short on content, to the extreme that one draft bestowed \$95 million annually on "connectivity," without defining its often fuzzy meaning. Connectivity is great, but how about coming up with a project that does it instead of just using the word?

The Amtrak-West 5 and 20 year plans are more positive about rail but even less focussed. The first stage would spend \$3.9 billion to upgrade existing routes, but when all is done, it would still take 8 hours via two bus transfers to get from downtown San Francisco to Los Angeles, about the same trip time Santa Fe had in the 1950's. The elapsed time for the single coast route train proposed between those cities is even longer. That is painfully ineffectual.

If we are going to spend \$3.9 billion of taxpayer funds on tracks in California, we better be thinking a bit harder about how we get value for our money, and how we can tilt growth toward trains more effectively. Here's a short list of principles I propose to anyone putting together rail project lists:

- Upgrading bad routes shared with freight that miss key markets is no longer good enough. It's time to put passengers first, and build tracks to rapidly link our cities.
- Fill the key missing gaps in California's



Strategic gaps in California's rail network need to be filled, like France did in 1996 with a 66-mile line that placed Charles de Gaulle Airport and EuroDisney on the national network. Cost was less than \$1.5 billion. Photo: R. Tolmach

rail network like San Francisco-Oakland and Bakersfield-Santa Clarita first before getting around to expensive low-traffic segments like San Luis Obispo-Salinas.

- Highest priority on intercity rail funding should be new routes in areas of heavy traffic, and I propose that we designate by law rail routes of statewide importance, to be defined for example as being rail routes more than 50 miles in length running within 10 miles of state highways with average daily traffic (ADT) of 60,000 trips or more.*
- Expand upon segments already in public ownership, with the goal of continuous Bay Area and Southern California networks with double track in public control wherever ADT exceeds 120,000. This would make possible frequent headway service that poses a feasible alternative to highway expansion.
- Use trains to guide smart growth. One of the main points of new rail infrastructure should be to foster private investment in community development and encourage transit-friendly projects around stations. Europe's national railways have become agents of urban change, boosting development in the centers of large and small cities close to stations. Swiss, German, Dutch, Spanish and French cities have been particularly successful models of this trend because in those locales, frequent headway train service has substantially improved mobility, increasing the attraction of central cities and close-in suburbs. Both compact residential developments and retail/commercial developments have resulted adjacent to stations.
- Let capable international financial institutions and private industry take a role designing fundable projects. When politicized public agencies like BART, Amtrak, or the High Speed Rail Authority develop routes without adequate in-house staff,

projects rapidly take on the public works aesthetic of cost being no object.

Passenger projects do best when the capital has to be paid back to the bank someday, and the bank has an interest in assuring the design works. This may be a new idea in the United States, but it is basic to rail in Europe and Asia.

California can benefit from the same types of rail-supported smart growth seen in Europe in the next decade, but only if we maximize the use of existing rail investments and actively encourage smart growth in places it is most feasible. Public agencies most of all need to take advantage of current public ownership of rights of way and support provision of new capital and operating funds for a core group of efficient new urban services of statewide importance. Here are two of California's fastest chances for economic growth:

1. **Los Angeles Mainline, Santa Clarita to San Bernardino.** Caltrans should consider paying Metrolink to run existing trains half-hourly on a 90-mile swath of publicly-owned tracks paralleling clogged freeways in the San Gabriel and San Fernando Valleys. At present, Metrolink runs frequent service only in the peaks and terminates most trains in Los Angeles, making through travel unattractive. Land at Glendale, Sylmar, El Monte, Covina, Pomona and other potential stations in the corridor is inexpensive, but new service would make development of TODs at these sites highly attractive.
2. **Connect Caltrain and Capitols to Build a Bay Area Mainline.** Hourly Baby Bullet trains start running in about a year, the fastest rails in the Bay Area, linking San Francisco, SFO, San Mateo, Palo Alto and Silicon Valley. Caltrans needs to ignore MTC posturing and retain a capable firm to design a cross-Bay railway link to carry Amtrak and Caltrain between East Bay stations and SF and the Peninsula. Such a line still can be built for less than \$1 billion dollars, according to European sources. The positive economic impacts of such a link are huge, especially for inner East Bay cities. West Oakland, Emeryville, Berkeley, Richmond, and Contra Costa stations become prime sites for major office and residential centers. At the same time, San Francisco and Millbrae stations could become office/retail megacenters like Euralille or Lyon Part-Dieu.

It's not too late to fix the California traffic mess and make this state a great place to live again. California can have a real train network by the end of this decade, but only if leaders grow up and put the brakes on purposely wasteful projects like the East Span or BART extensions which cost five times what they should and don't deliver promised benefits. If we target funds to projects that truly reshape regional mobility, all of California can benefit.

* **The 60,000 average daily traffic routes include Auburn-Sacramento-San Francisco-SFO-San Jose-Gilroy, Stockton-Livermore-San Francisco-Santa Rosa, Livermore-San Jose, and Modesto-Sacramento.**
In southern California, Bakersfield-Los Angeles-San Diego, Goleta-Santa Barbara-Los Angeles-Riverside-Palm Springs, and San Bernardino-Riverside-Orange County-LAX fit this criteria.