

DOES DIRIDON DISRESPECT VALLEY CITIES?

by Alan C. Miller
TRAC Executive Director

California's High Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) apparently will not reconsider its destructive decision to study only existing rail routes in the Central Valley, going right through each city, despite clear evidence it is a costly and unpopular plan. The Authority's Mehdi Morshed wrote TRAC on June 14, 2002 to say that all "non-railway corridors through the Central Valley have been eliminated from consideration at this time...These screening decisions are all supported and based on sound analysis."

Are they? And, is premature elimination of feasible and practical routes before a complete fiscal and environmental analysis in the best interests of the people of California? TRAC Vice President Dan McNamara warned HSRA at its May 15 Oakland meeting that "if you eliminate options now it is way too premature and it does open you up to litigation at the end of this."

Apparently, HSRA would rather fight than switch. HSRA Chair Rod Diridon told the San Joaquin Rail Committee (SJRC) at its July 12 meeting that the other options had been eliminated due to "an outcry from the communities and you." Diridon's claim that HSRA responds to community outcries may now cause one.

Larry Miller, an SJRC member who represents Fresno County said in an August letter to Valley newspapers that, "According to

HSRA these trains will travel at speeds of up to 220 mph. This means there is a roughly even chance that, on average, there will be something like a train every 10 minutes—night and day—barreling non-stop through Selma and Kingsburg at astronomically high speeds and with a sound pressure level that could be downright frightening."

"The specific number they put on this sound is 95 decibels—and above," said Miller. He compared it to the "end of an airport runway. If that noise level is not enough to make your head ache, it is certainly enough to stop all conversation. Every day. Every night. Day in. Day out. Inescapably – for all of the foreseeable future."

HSRA has met with politicians but has not gone out of its way to explain the project or its noise impacts to the Valley public, a factor which may have permanently harmed the project's credibility. Miller's letter further states, "Members of the HSRA insist that Valley residents were already informed of this possibility and have already had their opportunity to be heard on the subject, during what they call the 'scoping' process. Basically this means they sent out a few notices to a few local officials and told them their constituents were free to comment."

TRAC's own proposal on how to handle the noise problem is to avoid cities with the fast line. TRAC Executive Director Alan C. Miller testified at the San Jose HSRA Board Meeting on July 17 comparing HSRA's plan to TRAC's plan: "Our plan calls for the trains

that do not stop—only the trains that do not stop—to bypass the towns. How many trains is this? The [June 2000 Final Business Plan] on page 17 and 59 shows 170 trains a day. 130 run down the south end of the Valley. 80 of the trains do not even stop in Fresno. 104 of the trains do not make any other stops in the Valley. So we are taking 104 trains out of every town that they do not stop in in the Valley, plus we are taking every train out of all the Valley towns down Highway 99 that your plan proposes to blast through."

Dan Leavitt, a civil engineer with HSRA, was asked at a meeting at the Sierra Club in Berkeley how the authority would address the environmental impacts of dividing each Valley town with a surface 220 mph line. He suggested that trenching or tunneling was a viable option. However, when asked by Caltrans Rail Division Chief Warren Weber whether HSRA would underground the line, both Leavitt and Morshed denied that was ever their intent. It appears that HSRA answer changes for each new audience.

The only remaining option to mitigate noise would be to slow trains to 120 mph or less for every population cluster along the increasingly populated corridor. However, longer travel times would eliminate the very travel market that has justified the project.

Mr. Diridon apparently has a different strategy in mind on how to deal with the noise problem: deny it exists. In response to a question at the SJRC meeting, he stated: "Electric trains have virtually no noise."

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