

High Speed Rail

TransForm announces support of Proposition 1A: Safe, Reliable High-Speed Passenger Train Bond Act!

A letter from Stuart Cohen, TransForm's Executive Director.

I am pleased to announce that after a five-month coalition process the Board of Directors of TransForm has voted to support proposition 1A: the high-speed rail ballot measure.

Proposition 1A would provide \$9.95 billion dollars to catalyze the development of the 800 mile high-speed rail (HSR) system, and to make improvements to existing rail networks.

Building HSR in California will reinforce our cities as the hubs of our economies, promote sustainable land use, significantly reduce global warming pollution, and get commuters off congested roads and crowded airports. While it is an extremely expensive project, adding the same capacity by expanding highways and airports would cost at least twice as much.

Even with all of these benefits a number of TransForm's member groups made it clear that we should not support the bond measure if there remained the potential for a Los Banos station which would threaten portions of the Grasslands Ecological Area. At 230,000 acres the GEA is the largest remaining vestige of the freshwater wetlands that once dominated California's Central Valley. TransForm was also not going to support the measure if bond funds could not be spent in the Altamont Corridor.

Over the past four months, TransForm worked with the Sierra Club and other organizations to get provisions into AB 3034, a bill to amend the original bond measure that would help to meet these criteria. This bill, recently signed by Governor Schwarzenegger, places proposition 1A on the ballot and contains a host of important provisions.

First, approval of 1A will now establish a voter-backed ban on a station between Gilroy and Merced (i.e., Los Banos). What's more, the high-speed rail authority has committed to purchase easements on at least 10,000 acres of important habitat in the Grasslands Ecological Area (as outlined in the Final Environmental Impact Report).

Second, it allows bond funds to be spent for improvements on the Altamont corridor connecting the Bay Area to Modesto and Stockton. There are at least three different ways that funding could get spent here. First, funds could be used to vastly upgrade the existing commuter rail corridor, and a corridor study will soon be underway. Second, if a pending lawsuit against the Authority's FEIR is

successful it may require a new EIR and lead to the choice of the Altamont. Finally, the private sector is anticipated to contribute at least \$10 billion towards this project. If, in fact, the Pacheco Pass is an inferior choice, the private equity firms could predicate their investment on modification of the language, which could be approved by voters.

Like many other Bay Area transit advocates I have a penchant for the Altamont alternative. It gets the train closer to Sacramento during the first phase, and creates a faster Sacramento-Bay Area connection. It also would provide some relief for the highly congested I-580.

But when the entire HSR system is built out the difference between the two alternatives would be just one or two stations – Gilroy for Pacheco and Tri-Valley/Southern Alameda for the Altamont. And one benefit of the Pacheco is that it would connect the regions two largest cities. Trips between San Jose and San Francisco would be incredibly frequent and take just 30 minutes. Every train would also pass through both cities and SF, increasing the headways (especially for San Jose).

One of the most daunting challenges is the cost of the system; especially with our state budget in crisis. And while the price tag is very steep -- over \$30 billion to connect San Francisco and Los Angeles through Central Valley -- it pales in comparison to the cost of new highway and airport expansions. Caltrans estimates, for example, it will cost \$6 billion (2006 dollars) to widen Highway 99 from four lanes to six. Meeting interstate requirements and widening to eight lanes is estimated to cost at least \$20 billion.

Californians will continue to demand mobility, especially as the state grows to 50 million people by 2030. It is time to give it to them mobility in the form of a zero-emission high-speed train system that propels California into the 21st century.

Passage of proposition 1A would just be the first of many steps necessary to make the system a reality. But it is a necessary step and one that TransForm is proud to support. I invite you to read the section about Propostion 1A on our website, and to see the evaluation process that led to our support position at www.TransFormCA.org/campaign/high-speed-rail.

If you have questions about the project or TransForm's position please contact Carli Paine, TransForm's Transportation Program Director, at carli@TransFormCA.org or 510-740-3150 x315.

Sincerely,

Stuart Cohen

Executive Director