

Kevin McCarthy displays his clout, for good and ill

Dan Morain | FEBRUARY 24, 2017 5:30 AM



President Donald Trump, center, hosts a reception for House and Senate leaders in the State Dining Room of the White House in January. Some of the participants are, from left, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.; House Speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin; and House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield. **Susan Walsh** The Associated Press

As he regularly does, House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy was mining for Silicon Valley campaign money at a fundraiser at the Ritz-Carlton in San Francisco this month.

And as donors in blue California paid tribute to [the Republican congressman](#) from the Kern County oil patch with more than \$100,000, one of the gala's hosts, Jim

Wunderman, executive director of the business group, the Bay Area Council, broached a touchy subject.

McCarthy had sent a letter to our nation's newly confirmed transportation secretary, Elaine Chao, urging that she [block \\$650 million in federal funding to electrify the San Jose-to-San Francisco rail line](#), a project the Bay Area Council believes is vital to the Silicon Valley's economic viability.

"It was hard not to bring it up," Wunderman said. "Everybody was talking about it."

Little good it did Wunderman or the people who spend hours stuck in traffic on the Bay Shore Freeway and Highway 280. McCarthy's letter, signed by all 14 California Republican members of Congress, had its intended effect.

In one of her first acts as transportation secretary, Chao halted funding to electrify the rail line and replace old diesel engines, even though the project would vastly increase rail travel and take thousands of cars off the choked freeways.

McCarthy was displaying his clout in the era of Donald J. Trump, though he also was exposing Chao as a tool. So long as Republicans control the White House and Congress, few federal dollars will flow to California without McCarthy's blessing. That could make him the most important California politician not named Jerry Brown. The question is whether he will use that power for good or ill.

Earlier this month, Rep. Doug LaMalfa, who represents Oroville; McCarthy; and eight other California Republican members of Congress sent a letter urging that Trump approve Brown's request for federal disaster money to [repair the storm-ravaged Oroville Dam](#). Trump obliged. That was perfectly appropriate.

McCarthy's decision to block federal funding for the electrification of CalTrain is another matter. His beef with electrifying the San Jose-San Francisco line is that he despises high-speed rail, which is under construction in Fresno and one day will connect to San Jose.

High-speed rail and the electrification of the CalTrain line between San Jose and San Francisco are not directly linked, not that it matters. McCarthy tied them together in his letter to Chao in which he called for a full audit of high-speed rail, and said spending any federal money for the CalTrain line would be "an irresponsible use of taxpayer dollars." Hardly.

An average of 65,000 commuters use the line each day now. Although that's a fraction of the number of people who ride BART, CalTrain ridership would hit 110,000 once it is modernized, taking thousands of cars off the road each day.

"If you're not for that, you're really not for infrastructure," Brown said Friday, in an answer to my question about McCarthy's effort to derail the CalTrain project. "The only thing you can say for that is it's scoring political points by politicians that know better."

California and locals are putting up two-thirds of the money for the \$2 billion project, 15 years in the making. Contracts to build the rail cars and upgrade the tracks, which are supposed to be in place by Wednesday, depend on Uncle Sam coming through with the final \$650 million.

Trump would lose nothing politically by killing an infrastructure project started in the Obama administration that benefits Santa Clara, San Mateo and San Francisco counties. Nearly 80 percent of the voters in those three counties voted for Hillary Clinton.

But politicians often fire before aiming. Delaying or killing the Peninsula project would inflict collateral damage in red states. The rail cars would be built in the Salt Lake City area. Workers in Texas, South Carolina and Georgia, states that voted for Trump, would contribute parts, too. They'd all be manufacturing jobs, the sort that Trump is promising.

McCarthy, an [affable dealmaking politician](#), knows about earmarks, having learned at the knee of former Rep. Bill Thomas, his predecessor. That would be Thomas, as in the William M. Thomas Passenger Terminal at Bakersfield Airport, built with help of a \$722 million earmark Thomas secured in 2005 for various district projects.

Taking up where Thomas left off, McCarthy's smiling face is on the Bakersfield Airport website, holding a shovel in a cheesy photo with nine other men in suits holding shovels, commemorating the start of the rehabilitation of a new runway, paid for by a \$49 million federal grant.

Silicon Valley moguls make a show of their devotion to the environment. They build and drive electric cars, fund renewable energy projects and care deeply about mass transit. They do no evil and promise to make the world a better place. They also play politics.

In the 2015-16 election cycle, the billionaire founder of Intuit, Scott Cook; billionaire William Fisher of the family that controls Gap; billionaire Sean Parker; and billionaire Google founder Eric Schmidt all contributed money to McCarthy's campaigns. Bay Area

employers Genentech, Charles Schwab and Bechtel used their political action committees to donate to McCarthy, too.

Even if they don't have to stew in traffic, surely it matters to the CEOs and billionaires that people who work for them must suck exhaust.

Any one of them could and should pick up the phone and urge McCarthy to lift the embargo on funding for CalTrain. Or they could hit him where it hurts by skipping his next fundraiser. But they might lose the ability to consort with the second most powerful politician in California, and they couldn't have that.

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