

Editorial: Finding a political solution for Caltrain electrification

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It's easy to be disappointed and perplexed at the Federal Transit Administration's announcement it would delay a decision on whether it would allocate \$647 million toward electrifying Caltrain — a shovel-ready project that would create more nearly 10,000 direct and indirect jobs to a variety of areas across the country.

After all, infrastructure and jobs are hallmarks of the new Trump administration and the delay has the potential to increase the project's costs while jeopardizing those jobs. Proponents suggest the elimination of federal funding will "kill" the project, but nearly every rationale person knows there is no possibility electrification would be abandoned because of a financial setback — if that were the case, it would have been abandoned years ago.

Instead, the federal decision is a serious setback in a series of setbacks that Caltrain officials have been meeting to keep this project on track. The Caltrain electrification project has long been touted as a way to increase service in a critical area (here) while also reducing local emissions. Caltrain is a critical piece to this area's infrastructure and, without it, the effect on our roads and our technology industry would be severe. That would also have a ripple effect on other areas and industries. While there are a handful of naysayers, the vast majority of people — particularly sensible ones — believe in the necessity of improving Caltrain service through the electrification process.

However, it has been tied to the state's controversial high-speed rail project through a political deal called the blended system in which Caltrain would receive high-speed rail money in exchange for having its tracks be able to share service with new high-speed trains once the project moves north of San Jose.

That deal was arrived at in part to soothe those along the Caltrain line concerned about being run roughshod by high-speed rail when its project details were first released. It was also a way to ensure there would be some improvements to the Caltrain line if the high-speed rail project were somehow halted. The deal was a political success in that it solved two problems — finding money for electrification and healing some concern about high-speed rail's impact on the Peninsula's sometimes sleepy cities.

We arrived at today's situation after House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy led about a dozen California Republicans in Congress in asking for a delay in funding of high-speed rail until there could be a more thorough review. Many Republicans have long said the high-speed rail project is too costly and should be scrapped. New Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao apparently listened and delayed the funding for the electrification project until the president's budget proposal even though the Caltrain project has separate utility even if high-speed rail never arrives. So was this a political decision? Yes. Was it partisan? Yes. Can it be resolved? Yes.

The solution is simple — politics itself. If it was indeed a political decision, then political action is necessary. This is why we have elected representatives in Congress, to represent our interests and negotiate for our needs. If there is a political decision that affects this area, the time is now to engage in discussions with everyone who has a vested interest. That means congressional Republicans, the FTA and the Trump administration. It means Gov. Jerry Brown gets involved as well as House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, and every other Bay Area congressional representative. There may be some discomfort because of their recent political statements made in opposition to the new administration's policies, but that can be overcome when everyone gets down to business. Get face to face, engage and explain the benefits of the Caltrain electrification project and how it is separate from high-speed rail.

Time is of the essence. Caltrain has a March 1 deadline to meet contractual obligations to lock in the price at what now stands at \$2 billion. Make a deal that benefits this area now and into the future. This project is simply too important for Caltrain to start over in its search for such a large portion of its funding. It's time for each and every one of our representatives to not only engage and expound but work until the administration releases the necessary funds for the project to proceed.

See more at: <http://www.smdailyjournal.com/articles/opinions/2017-02-22/editorial-finding-a-political-solution-for-caltrain-electrification/1776425176250.html#sthash.V8j0TQM7.dpuf>