

Politics derails Caltrain plan

San Francisco Chronicle | February 22, 2017



Photo: Jeff Chiu, Associated Press

FILE - In this July 1, 2013, file photo, commuters board a Caltrain train at the Caltrain and Bay Area Rapid Transit station in Millbrae, Calif. The Federal Transit Administration is delaying a decision on whether to approve a \$650 million federal grant for electrification of a San Francisco Bay Area train system that would also help California's high-speed rail project. Congressional Republicans had pushed the administration to reject the application from Caltrain. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File)

The Trump administration's move to halt funding for Caltrain electrification is an illustration of partisan politics at its worst. That it was prodded by California's congressional Republicans, employing factually suspect arguments, is especially shameful.

The delay in \$647 million in federal funding ordered by newly minted Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao threatens a modernization project that was many years in the making and within a month of launching.

If this project falls apart as a result of this political gamesmanship, the cost will be continued noise and air pollution from the diesel locomotives, a lost opportunity for faster and more frequent train service, more traffic on the already heavily congested Highway 101 and Interstate 280, and nearly 10,000 jobs in California as well as Utah, Florida and Texas.

It was plain disingenuous that the Republican lawmakers cited their concerns about the state's big high-speed rail project as reason to hold off on Caltrain electrification.

Yes, that system could eventually share the upgraded tracks. But the electrification of the 52-mile corridor between San Jose and San Francisco stands on its own merits, even if high-speed rail is never built. That route already bulges at a capacity of 65,000 riders a day — double the load of 2005 — and demand is growing. The project has cleared environmental review and secured \$1.3 billion in local, regional and state funding. The federal funding was the last missing piece. It is projected to increase the system's capacity to 100,000 weekday riders by 2040.

In their letter to Chao, the California Republicans mistakenly claimed that the grant request came from the California High Speed Rail Authority. It was from Caltrain itself, which has had electrification in its strategic plan since 1999; state voters did not approve high-speed rail between San Francisco and the Los Angeles area until 2008. The GOP lawmakers were demanding a delay for further study of the overall high-speed rail project, raising concern about its cost and efficacy.

It is outrageous that elected representatives would sabotage a critical infrastructure project in their own state as collateral damage in their zeal to stop the bullet train.

Frustrated local leaders are holding out hope that President Trump, who has cited infrastructure as one area where Republicans and Democrats can find common ground in a polarized Washington, might resurrect the federal grant for Caltrain in his fiscal 2018 budget. He should, as a matter of creating jobs, cleaning the air and keeping people moving in one of the most vibrant and productive corners of the American economy.

<http://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/editorials/article/Politics-derails-Caltrain-plan-10952162.php>