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Washington's politics shouldn't block a needed Caltrain upgrade

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Photo: Paul Chinn, The Chronicle

A southbound train arrives at the Bayshore Caltrain station in Brisbane, Calif. on Friday, Jan. 13, 2017.

President Trump has an opportunity in the Bay Area to make good on his repeated and worthy pledge to upgrade outdated public infrastructure. Or he can give in to a political divide that will punish 65,000 Peninsula commuters.

The test is whether he'll allow \$647 million in federal money long planned for modernizing the crowded and creaky Caltrain line along 52 miles of tracks between San Jose and San Francisco. State Republicans in Congress aren't sold on the idea. They view the Caltrain upgrade as part of the much larger high-speed-rail project viewed as a boondoggle.

That's an argument with little merit, especially for strap hangers jammed into smoke-spewing diesel trains running the rails through Silicon Valley. Allowing a new fleet of electrified rolling stock will curb pollution, add to capacity and reliability, and create jobs. That's pretty much the description of what improved infrastructure offers.

The Caltrain upgrade isn't new. Planners and transit experts have studied it for years while collecting public support and funds to make it happen. When Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao withheld the federal portion a month ago, the local reaction quickly took shape.

The Silicon Valley Leadership Group, which represents major employers, collected 121 signatures from CEOs and top executives from top-name companies straddling the Caltrain line. Other riders use the trains to get to classes, appointments and everyday errands. It's a workhorse system that has needed to take pressure of ever-clogged Highway 101.

Politics shouldn't rule this decision. Gov. Jerry Brown spent a day in Washington this week, hoping to soothe matters with Republicans. His argument: High-speed rail and Caltrain modernization aren't the same project, and the need for improved Peninsula service in a hub of innovation is critical. Holding the key in the eventual decision is Kevin McCarthy, the House majority leader from Bakersfield who has Trump's ear.

There are several angry issues that divide California from Washington, with health care and immigration the most prominent. But a needed upgrade of a

commuter line shouldn't be a proxy in these fights. The Trump team should let Caltrain roll into the future.

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