

Consultants hijack bullet train, but problem is the plan itself

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It's been nearly 11 years since California voters approved a ballot measure to provide \$9.95 billion in initial bond funding for a high-speed rail system that would provide a "safe, convenient, affordable and reliable alternative to driving and high gas prices" as it zoomed commuters from San Francisco to Los Angeles for a low-priced ticket.

The plan was supported by the state's political establishment and by much of the media. For instance, the Los Angeles Times opined the bullet train was a "visionary leap that would cement California's place as the nation's most forward-thinking state," while the San Francisco Bay Guardian feared that the costs of "not" approving the idea would be "huge."

But a Times report last week is the latest confirmation of what the Orange County Register had predicted, in its editorial opposing Proposition 1A in 2008: It was a "nice dream" that veered into "fantasyland territory." The report found that the project — now \$44 billion over budget and 13 years behind schedule, even with a modified design that ignores many "guarantees" made to California voters — has become "overly reliant on a network of high-cost consultants who have consistently underestimated the difficulty of the task."

This was not a surprise. Unions dumped \$1.6 million in campaign spending to secure the voters' OK, with contracting and engineering firms providing \$837,000 in contributions, according to the report. The libertarian Cato Institute's David Boaz sees this as evidence of "an 'iron triangle' of government agencies that handle a particular issue or project, special interests that benefit from it" and a "flow of personnel" that's part of this "cozy process."

Hindsight is 20/20, but this is the predictable result of government projects that spend vast amounts of public funds on major infrastructure projects with insufficient oversight and accountability. The bullet train has gone further than most projects in handing over control to private contractors, but the problem is the project itself. We doubt that hiring an army of highly compensated government employees will rectify the train's fundamental problems.

The entire concept was based on grandiose visions from Europe and Japan rather than practical considerations of California's geography. We never understood the thrill of traveling from the Bay Area to Southern California in the promised 2 hours and 40 minutes for around 100 bucks — when one can already do that in half the time via Southwest Airlines.

Meanwhile, engineering problems — e.g., tunneling through the Tehachapi mountains — mounted. The authority decided to use a "blended" route that shared lines with Caltrain in the

major metropolitan areas. That turned the system into a glorified commuter system, as the rail authority (and the courts) shrugged at design changes that circumvented the initiative's fine print.

In his State of the State address, Gov. Gavin Newsom called for scaling back the project by focusing on a segment in the Central Valley. He recently promised to rein in use of consultants. Last November, Auditor Elaine Howle released a scathing report that pointed to myriad problems with land acquisition and funding — and called for the authority “to do more to control the soaring costs of its contracts.”

But California's high-speed rail project doesn't need better management. It needs to be scuttled entirely, and put out of its — and our — misery.