



California's \$68B Rail Project Will Hire the 'Disadvantaged' -- Like Felons and Dropouts

By: Joshua Rhett Miller – March 27, 2013

What do high school dropouts, convicted felons and union apprentices have in common? They're all "disadvantaged" workers who — alongside veterans, former foster children and single parents — must account for at least 10 percent of the labor force behind California's \$68 billion high-speed rail project. By 2029, the state's High-Speed Rail Authority hopes to send commuters hurtling at 200 mph between San Francisco and Los Angeles. The 800-mile system with up to 24 stations will eventually extend to Sacramento and San Diego, but some critics — and even former proponents of the megaproject — are now questioning its viability.

Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at Cato Institute, a Washington-based think tank, said his biggest concern is not the unconventional workforce demand, but that the electrically-powered train system is really a "political project" aimed at fattening the wallets of well-connected unions, contractors, engineers and associated firms.

"There's a lot of money to be made out of building this and the whole goal of high-speed rail is to make that money, to transfer money from taxpayers into the pockets of selected supporters of the Obama administration," O'Toole told FoxNews.com. "It always comes back to politics."

Regarding the disadvantaged workers aspect of the project, O'Toole said he found some value in educating less-fortunate workers, particularly if it's seen as a Progress Administration-type project, or one primarily aimed at stimulating the economy.

"On the other hand, is it really going to get them jobs in the future when the high-speed rail project is done? It's probably not going to be that valuable for them," he continued.

But oversight of the massive project will be its biggest hurdle, O'Toole claims, rather than vetting the workers who will build it.

"Nobody's ever spent this much money on one project before, and it's questionable whether we can," he said. "There will be somebody riding it, but does it justify the billions you're going to spend to get it?"

Quentin Kopp, the former chair of the state's Senate transportation committee who co-wrote legislation launching the project, recently filed a legal declaration contained in a

civil suit seeking to halt it, reportedly claiming the system as currently planned violates the law underpinning \$9.95 billion in state funding approved by voters in 2008.

"They have just mangled this project," Kopp told the Los Angeles Times. "They distorted it. We don't get a high-speed rail system. It is the great train robbery."

In Kopp's declaration, the former judge claims the plan approved last year by transit officials violated several voter-imposed requirements, including that construction occur in "usable segments" throughout California and that funding to complete each segment be secured prior to the start of shovels striking the ground.

But Kopp claims the current plan to build 130 miles of rail in the Central Valley for \$6 billion beginning this summer will not produce a usable segment. The first feasible segment of service within the plan would connect Merced to the San Fernando Valley at an estimated cost of \$31 billion — funds that the recession-weary state does not have, according to Kopp's declaration.

Authority officials, in a statement to FoxNews.com, said the project is "moving forward" as originally planned.

"We are moving forward with the high-speed rail program which was recommended by the state's independent panel of experts, approved by the legislature and previously supported by Mr. Kopp," the statement read.

Dan Richard, chairman of the California High Speed Rail Authority, told the Los Angeles Times that Kopp's lawsuit is wrong, both factually and legally. Deals to share sections of urban track with slower commuter rail systems and to send massive investments to Southern California and Bay Area transit agencies were crucial to securing statewide political support for the project, he said.

"It is one thing to sit back and criticize, and it is another thing to build something," Richard told the newspaper. "We have made tremendous progress."

Other critics of the project, meanwhile, have focused on a policy contained in a request for proposals issued to contractors in December to reserve a portion of the construction jobs for certain disadvantaged groups, including those who have been convicted of a crime.

"There's another chapter in the high-speed fail saga, and I almost can't do this one with a straight face," Assemblyman Brian Jones, R-Santee, said in a recent video series in which he shares political frustrations. "What a social engineering disaster this is going to be, and add to California's laughingstock reputation."

Rather than hiring those "most in need," Jones suggested putting to work someone who is duly qualified for the job.

"California needs to stop trying to help those who don't want to help themselves and find those that really do want to work," Jones said.

Despite those concerns, several powerful Democrats continue to back the plan, including Gov. Jerry Brown, Rep. Nancy Pelosi, Sen. Dianne Feinstein and President Obama. Voter

support, however, has largely evaporated since 2008. A recent statewide survey found that 54 percent of likely voters now oppose the project.

“Californians’ continuing concern about the economy and the state and federal budgets make planning for the future a difficult process,” said Mark Baldassare, president and CEO of the Public Policy Institute of California.

California High-Speed Rail Authority officials, meanwhile, said that a completed system will eliminate the need to spend more than \$150 billion on 4,300 new lane-miles of highway, 115 additional gates at airports and four new airport runways. The first phase of construction would directly employ roughly 3,500 people. All told, as many as 100,000 construction-related jobs would be created during each year the system is built and would reduce dependence on foreign oil by up to 12.7 million barrels per year.

In Fresno County, where unemployment hovers above 14 percent, the Fresno Regional Workforce Investment Board (FRWIB) is reportedly fielding so many calls from prospective workers that a rail-specific website is being prepared to help screen applicants once construction begins.

"The question is, the task that we have, which I hope does not become a herculean task, is that we have to be sure that the people we are going to refer over are competitive," FRWIB Executive Director Blake Konczal told the Sacramento Bee. "The contractors don't have to hire anybody if they're not qualified, so our job is to make sure that the local people that we refer over are screened, that they receive adequate training and that they're ready to go."