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Opinion: Here's why California high-speed rail proponents are wrong

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The commentary last week by Rep. Ro Khanna and Ron Diridon Sr. deflecting criticism of California's high-speed rail project relies on flawed arguments.

Despite the increased cost estimates revealed in the California High Speed Rail Authority's latest update, Khanna and Diridon contend the project is still a bargain because, on a per-mile basis, it is cheaper than Britain's troubled line connecting London to the West Midlands.

But this is a comparison between two guesstimates. We cannot be sure what the final cost will be. We know that in nominal dollars, the estimated cost of the 520-mile San Francisco-to-Anaheim line has grown from \$33 billion in 2008 to as much as \$128 billion today.

Such a comparison fails to address whether the project is still needed. If we are indeed wasting money on the California bullet train, there should be no comfort from the fact that another country is wasting more money.

We already know that California high-speed rail is not a great climate change solution given its reduced (but still exaggerated) ridership projection. Further, the extended timeline for the implementation of full Phase 1 service likely means the project won't be fully running until after California has banned the sale of new gasoline-powered cars.

Khanna and Diridon still subscribe to a now-dated claim that the high-speed rail line is needed to accommodate a rapid rise in California intercity travel. They write that "the only other way to address California's congestion crisis — building the equivalent of a new six-lane highway between San Francisco and Los Angeles as well as a major new airport — would cost far more than high-speed rail."

While it's true that the Bay Area and Los Angeles have points of serious traffic congestion, there is no lack of interregional travel capacity. Most airports are still below historic peak passenger loads, and we have underutilized airfields that could be pressed into service if this changes.

For example, Oakland International had 7.1 million enplanements in 2007, compared to 6.6 million in 2019, before the air travel collapsed amidst the pandemic. In 2022, enplanements at OAK had rebounded to about 5.6 million. Meanwhile, Buchanan Field in Concord only has three or four commercial departures per day,

Interstate 5 in the Central Valley is generally not congested, and, where there are occasional bottlenecks, they can be remedied by adding passing lanes at a comparatively low cost. The addition of a lane on Highway 101 north of Novato is costing about \$30 million per mile — well below the \$192 million per mile the High Speed Rail Authority expects to spend to connect Bakersfield with Merced.

Nor is it clear that intercity congestion in California will increase much from recent levels. Population in both Southern California and the Bay Area stagnated before the pandemic-driven decline. A Caltrans economic forecast shows the state's population rising very slowly in the 2020s and then falling again in the late 2030s, when the full HSR line may be finished.

The Caltrans projection, which is likely to be revised downward later this year, currently shows state population peaking at 40.5 million. This is a far cry from the 60 million Californians forecasters expected we would eventually see back in 2007.

Finally, because many in-person meetings are being replaced with online interactions, the amount of business travel required at any given population level has been permanently reduced.

California high-speed rail proponents could not have been expected to foresee the rise of Zoom meetings or the flattening of the state's population when they placed their bond measure on the 2008 ballot. But now that the need for the high-speed rail project has diminished and costs have skyrocketed, throwing good money after bad is indefensible.

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