

Boondoggle: Why California and Buckinghamshire are not a thousand miles apart on high speed rail



Artist's impression of the high speed train in California

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AMERICANS have a fantastic word in their vocabulary which they use to attack high speed rail: Boondoggle.

“It means work or activity which is wasteful or pointless but gives the appearance of having value,” explains Russ Peterson, who is fighting the train proposals in California.

The similarities between his cause and those protesting against High Speed Two here in Bucks are stark.

It is argued that both would cut up communities and destroy the environment. Both are far too expensive, held up by a dodgy business case and over-inflated passenger figures and would end up as white elephants, campaigners add.

And by sheer coincidence, both movements against the plans actually held demonstrations on the same weekend earlier this month – and for once the weather here was better than in the Golden State.

Whereas the rally in sunny Great Missenden attracted 2,000 people, the one in rainy Burlingame was attended by around 500 protesters, waving placards with slogans such as ‘here comes high-speed rail - there goes the neighborhood’, and ‘there goes \$\$ for schools’.

“To understand that number you have to know it was raining, and for sunny Californians that was a lot of people,” said Mr Peterson, from the Community Coalition on High Speed Rail.

High speed rail schemes are causing controversy across the States, but none more so than in California where a \$42 billion taxpayer funded link from Los Angeles to San Francisco is planned for 2020. The alignment proposed by the California High Speed Rail Authority for the area surrounding San Francisco is particularly contentious.

Tina Andolina, from the Planning and Conservation League, said residents were horrified about the viaducts the trains would run on.

“Pictures show these walls are 30ft high and would have the train on top of them. They would be concrete or brick and remind me a whole lot of the Berlin Wall, which is a scary thought.”

Like here in Aylesbury Vale, tunnels have been ruled out because they are too expensive.

“They want to do this on the cheap but it will destroy our community,” added Ms Andolina.

Her group is one of several who have filed a suit against the rail authority, claiming that its environmental impact report is inadequate and the ridership and revenue forecasts flawed.

“This is all over the newspapers and is absolutely a hot issue,” Ms Andolina said. “People are raising money to fight this thing. They are not going to let it come through and destroy their communities because a couple of politicians tell them it is for the good.”

However, Rachel Wall, spokeswoman for the California High Speed Rail Authority, said there was ‘a lot of support for the project despite what the headlines say’.

“Two-thirds of Californians support this,” she said. The principle of the scheme was actually originally voted for by Californians in a referendum.

Miss Wall added: “Our proposed route would take 2hrs 40mins from San Francisco to LA. It will give people an alternative to sitting in their car for seven hours.

“In California we are very aware that the population is going to boom and we need to do something about how congested our roads are and how burdened our airports are. The alternative is building hundreds of miles of more roads and more airport runways.”

She said the authority had already fought a previous lawsuit and was given a ‘vote of confidence’ by being allowed to continue, despite a ‘few corrections’ that needed to be made.

Miss Wall added that there would potentially be up to 24 stations on the 520 mile track between LA and San Francisco – meaning that many more communities would be able to share the advantages of high speed rail than in the UK.

Another difference between the countries is unlike the cross party support that exists for high speed rail in the UK, in America the Republicans are broadly against the Obama administration’s backing of the plans.

Randal O’Toole, from the Cato Institute, a centre-right think-tank, has written extensively on why the US cannot afford the ‘luxury’ of high speed rail.

“High speed rail is slower than flying, less convenient than driving and a lot more expensive than either,” he said.

“The US and UK are giving huge subsidies for what is essentially an obsolete form of transportation.”