



## **Bullet-train fever not catching on in U.S.**

California, which often sets the pace, isn't this time.

By: John Phillips – November 8, 2013

California exports a lot of its creations to the rest of the country and, for that matter, the rest of the world. Hollywood is largely responsible for the planet's music, film and pop culture. The Silicon Valley gives us our computers, phones and gadgets. The Central Valley is the nation's breadbasket, producing the fruit, vegetables and nuts that feed many millions. And the decisions made at our ballot boxes tend to find imitators all over the country, too.

The U.S. High Speed Rail Association, which recently and very intentionally met in Los Angeles, wants California's newest gift to the nation to be more bullet train projects.

California's long fascination with high-speed rail reached its peak in 2008, when voters approved Proposition 1A – which authorized \$10 billion in bonds to pay for initial work on the proposed 800-mile system. Since then, millions have been spent and billions more are in the pipeline – including \$3.5 billion from the federal government.

Despite the fact that the estimated construction costs for the project have doubled since November 2008, to \$68 billion, the state's political ruling class is steadfastly committed to the project. The chief cheerleader for the program is Gov. Jerry Brown, who views the train as an integral part of his legacy.

But outside California, there just isn't a lot of interest.

There are a bunch of reasons why other states are saying no to rail, but the main one is money. According to American Public Media's "Marketplace" radio program, it's unclear what a nationwide system would even cost.

Some rail activists think that the only way to solve this problem is to starve the roads. Stan Feinsod, a professor at the Mineta Transportation Institute at San Jose State, told "Marketplace" that lawmakers should prioritize rail funding over highway spending. "You can't buy more lanes. ... Passenger rail is a hell of a lot less expensive than building out your highway network, and trying to add lanes and lanes and lanes. It just doesn't work."

If you follow this logic, planners should deliberately ignore road projects until driving is so time-consuming and miserable that voters clamor for more rail.

On the flip side, Cato Institute senior fellow Randall O'Toole believes that high-speed rail is a money pit and that the U.S. is actually ahead of European and Asian countries that have invested heavily in track technology. He thinks the future lies in driverless cars and more efficient air travel. "Rail makes a lot of sense for freight. ... It really doesn't make much sense for passengers anymore."

And that's the hurdle that advocates for high-speed rail are having a hard time getting over. Financially speaking, trains don't make sense for the taxpayer or the consumer. In California, we were told the project would cost \$34 billion; now the estimate has doubled, and nobody knows what the final price tag will be. We were also told the train would be an attractive alternative to air travel, when, in reality, if you're going from Los Angeles to San Francisco, it would take longer and cost more by rail than hopping on a Southwest Airlines 737.

Other states are sitting back and patiently watching us double down on the bullet train. But they aren't watching us like we're the older sibling who moved to the big city to do amazing things; they're looking at us like we're a lab mouse in the hands of a guy in a lab coat.

The world is a better place because of Californians and their creativity. But, in the case of bullet trains, we shouldn't be copied – we should be given a mulligan.