

Groups release report in favor of East Bay bullet train route

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Three environmental and transportation groups that sued the California High-Speed Rail Authority last year released a study Tuesday that concludes bullet trains would get to San Francisco quicker and cause less environmental damage if they traveled through the East Bay.

The French firm Setec Ferroviare prepared the report titled "Evaluation of an Alignment for the California High-Speed Rail Project Bay Area to Central Valley Segment" at the request of the Sacramento-based California Rail Foundation, one of the petitioners in the lawsuit against the rail authority. The suit challenged the decision to run bullet trains through Pacheco Pass and the Peninsula rather than through Altamont Pass and the East Bay.

"For the operation of a high-speed rail service, the route through Altamont has many more advantages than the Pacheco plan," the Setec Ferroviare report concludes.

The report, which the groups sent to the rail authority as part of their comments on the revised program-level environmental report, proposes further study of running the trains in an elevated

alignment along Highway 101 between Redwood City and San Francisco International Airport. It also cautions against letting bullet trains share a large portion of the Caltrain right of way, saying that could slow down the high-speed system.

Under the Pacheco plan, the high-speed rail route on or adjacent to the Caltrain network would span 79 miles between Gilroy and San Francisco,

according to the report. But if the trains went through the East Bay, traveled over the Dumbarton railway bridge and connected with Caltrain in Redwood City, they would only travel along the corridor for 26 miles, the report says.

"These 53 miles of track are freed up for circulation of Caltrain," the report states. "Thus this configuration allows for market development of commuter trains and significantly reduces the number of conflicts between slow and fast trains. ... Even if Altamont route is a little bit longer (as much as 5 miles), the route through Altamont is nevertheless more favorable, with a quicker travel time from/to Southern California, because of the avoidance of 53 miles of shared track with Caltrain local trains."

High-speed rail authority Board Member Rod Diridon hadn't seen the report but said the French firm has no official standing and is working on behalf of an advocacy group.

"They're not unbiased," Diridon said Monday. "They're trying to sell a point of view. We're not. We don't care. We want the best approach."

"We've already studied (the Altamont Pass)," he added. "The route is going to be going now from San Francisco to Gilroy and under the Pacheco corridor for the main line high-speed-rail system."

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Fellow Board Member Quentin Kopp said it would be illegal for him to prejudge the report, which the board will consider at a meeting in June or July along with all other public comment.

"We're hoping that the new leadership at the high-speed rail authority is no longer going to continue its very biased approach to designing a route," said David Schonbrunn, president of the Transportation Solutions Defense and Education Fund, or TRANSDEF, which also sponsored the report. "They haven't been fair for the last 10 years on this issue, and this report, we believe, is going to be legally adequate to do the right thing ... to study (Altamont) in a way that doesn't trash it."

Schonbrunn added that the groups selected Setec Ferroviaire to complete the report because the French company has firsthand knowledge of high-speed rail and isn't looking for contracts from the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

Setec Ferroviaire "knows a lot more about high-speed rail than anybody at the high-speed rail authority or hired by the high-speed rail authority," he said.

Local leaders asked the rail authority to consider the Altamont alternative outlined by Setec Ferroviaire at a news conference on the report's release held Tuesday morning in front of Burlingame High School.

"We've been very concerned about trying to shove high-speed rail into the Caltrain corridor," Palo Alto Mayor Pat Burt said at the conference. "It would be a permanent disruption to 17 of some of the best communities in the state."

Burlingame Mayor Cathy Baylock added that administrators at Burlingame High School remain concerned that bullet trains, which are slated to pass just in front of the 1,400-student campus, would produce enough noise and vibrations to disrupt class.

The report cost about \$50,000, with the town of Atherton contributing \$5,000 and the rest coming from private donors, California Rail Foundation president Richard Tolmach said at the press conference. Atherton officials are requesting \$100,000 in the 2010-11 fiscal year budget for high-speed rail expenses, about \$60,000 of which will go to a lobbyist in Sacramento, Public Works Director Duncan Jones said.

He noted that the town's \$5,000 contribution went to Tuesday's report, as well as a second California Rail Foundation study.

Atherton, along with Menlo Park, sued the rail authority last year with the California Rail Foundation, the Planning and Conservation League and TRANSDEF.

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