

Rail groups: Altamont or lawsuit

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High-speed rail trains should come across the Altamont Pass over the Dumbarton Bridge and alongside Highway 101 to San Francisco, according to a report released by three environmental groups that has gained early support from local elected officials.

If the California High-Speed Rail Authority does not seriously consider this option then it faces costly litigation, said David Schonbrunn, president of Transportation Solutions Defense and Education Fund.

"This alternative represents a break from the past," Schonbrunn said. "No longer can they say the Altamont route is infeasible. They will consider this or deal with us in court."

Schonbrunn was flanked by Burlingame Mayor Cathy Baylock, Palo Alto Mayor Pat Burt and Jim Janz, former mayor of Atherton, at a press conference in front of Burlingame High School yesterday morning as he praised the Altamont alternative.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority, however, has identified the Pacheco Pass and Caltrain corridor as its preferred route after conducting environmental reviews of both alternatives.

The rail authority's review of the Altamont alternative is being called inadequate by foes of the Pacheco Pass option and a lawsuit forced the decertification of the environmental impact report to reconsider the feasibility of using the Altamont corridor.

The California Rail Foundation commissioned an independent evaluation of the Altamont route and has determined that it is a feasible option. Altamont would be less costly, be better for the environment and generate greater ridership, said Richard Tolmach, president of the foundation.

The foundation, along with the Planning and Conservation League and TRANSDEF held the press conference near the Burlingame Caltrain Station adjacent to a historic grove of eucalyptus trees to spell out the benefits of using the Altamont corridor.

Burlingame risks losing the giant trees if high-speed rail trains use the Caltrain corridor, a point Baylock made clear yesterday.

"I hope the rail authority seriously considers the alternative presented to them," Baylock said. She also pointed out the San Mateo Union High School District's opposition to using the Caltrain corridor based on the large amount of hazardous materials that exist below and around the Caltrain railway and the disruption to 1,400 students at Burlingame High School from noise and congestion impacts.

The school district has requested the rail authority set aside \$75 million in a restricted reserve for funding to mitigate any potential damage and disruption.

Alternative avoids sprawl

The new report, conducted by French rail experts Setec Ferroviaire, concludes that Altamont is feasible because it avoids inducing sprawl in Santa Clara and Merced counties; addresses traffic congestion in the East Bay; and avoids the Grasslands Ecological Area, the state's largest fresh water wetlands complex.

The report cost \$50,000 and was paid for in part by the town of Atherton.



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Burlingame Mayor Cathy Baylock spoke in favor of the Altamont alternative for high-speed rail tracks to avoid disruption to the city.

Setec Ferroviaire's report will be included in the revised environmental impact report for the Bay Area to Central Valley segment of the line that will eventually be either rejected or approved by the California High-Speed Rail Authority's nine-member Board of Directors.

The Altamont report comes on the heels of a state auditor's report last week critical of the rail authority.

The project risks delays or an incomplete system because of inadequate planning, weak oversight and lax contract management, according to California State Auditor Elaine Howle.

The state auditor is critical of the rail authority's reliance on federal funds to the tune of nearly \$19 billion despite having no commitments beyond the \$2.25 billion the state received in January in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds.

The spending plan includes nearly \$12 billion in federal and state funds through 2013, more than 2.5 times what is now available, according to the auditor's report.

The rail authority is planning a route with electrified bullet trains traveling from Los Angeles to San Francisco at a cost of more than \$40 billion. It received a significant boost when voters approved Proposition 1A, a \$9.95 billion bond in November 2008.

Setec Ferroviaire, however, suggests the line be split in Fremont to serve both San Jose and San Francisco.

Menlo Park, Atherton and Palo Alto sued the rail authority to open up the EIR related to the Altamont Pass. Those cities are primarily concerned with property takeaways and the disruption to downtown business.

Burlingame, along with Belmont, Atherton, Menlo Park and Palo Alto formed the Peninsula Cities Consortium in 2009 to put pressure on the rail authority to build the right system.

Building the right system for Burlingame

The right system, according to Baylock, is a bored tunnel through Burlingame. That option is cost prohibitive, however, costing an additional \$1 billion to construct, according to the rail authority.

A recently released alternatives analysis report identifies either an aerial option or a cut-and-covered trench in Burlingame. Baylock, however, prefers Setec Ferroviaire's alternative to have the line run along Highway 101 on the Bay side directly to the San Francisco International Airport and join the Caltrain corridor north of Millbrae.

The rail authority has identified Millbrae as a major station stop and is also considering building a depot in Redwood City or Palo Alto.

"I thought they were done with all this," Millbrae Councilwoman Gina Papan said yesterday. "It sounds interesting. It is too early for me to comment, though. I'm curious to see how the rail authority responds."

Part of Baylock's argument to reevaluate the Altamont route was due to the lack of public meetings on the Peninsula in 2008 related to the Bay Area-to-Central Valley environmental impact report.

Most Burlingame residents, Baylock said, were unaware of the agreements in place between Caltrain and the rail authority when they approved Proposition 1A.

Caltrain is currently facing a huge deficit and is relying on high-speed rail to come up the Peninsula so that it can electrify and grade separate the entire system.

But Palo Alto's mayor insists Caltrain needs to have its own dedicated funding stream and should not have to rely on the rail authority for survival.

"Trying to shoehorn the system into the Caltrain corridor is problematic," Burt said. "We care about the future success of Caltrain but there better be a Plan B. The authority's above-grade system will be permanently destructive to 17 cities along the Caltrain corridor."

The California Rail Foundation, formed in 1987, contends the rail authority did not take an objective look at the Altamont alternative.

The foundation, which advocates for a modern train system in the state, supported the rail project until it bypassed Altamont, Tolmach said.

Due diligence

California High-Speed Rail Authority board member Judge Quentin Kopp said the new proposal will be looked at closely by the board.

“We will do our due diligence for a third time,” Kopp said. The board looked at Altamont previously, Kopp said, and determined the environmental impacts would be too great to have the system cut across the Bay from Fremont to Redwood City, particularly to the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

The refuge spans 30,000 acres of open Bay, salt pond, salt marsh, mudflat, upland and vernal pool habitats located throughout south San Francisco Bay. It is the first National Wildlife Refuge established in the United States and is dedicated to preserving and enhancing wildlife habitat, protecting migratory birds and protecting threatened and endangered species.

“As with any other public comment, this comment and assertion will be evaluated in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act,” Kopp said yesterday.

The board is currently reviewing comments from the recirculated EIR related to the Bay Area-to-Central Valley portion of the line. Kopp anticipates the board will make a decision on the revised EIR sometime in July.

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