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Dams, not trains, should be our rallying cry

COLUMNISTS



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If you've driven through the Central Valley on I-5 or the 99, you've probably seen the signs.

High-speed rail in California is a boondoggle. And that's coming from someone who, I'll timidly admit, voted "yes" on the ballot initiative and bond measure to create the California High Speed Rail Authority.

My family still teases me over the vote. I doubt they'll ever stop.

Perhaps it was young and idealistic of me to have bought into the concept of a high-speed transportation system that allows Californians to quickly and easily travel the length of the Golden State. (I still buy into it.) These days, I'd give just about anything to cut the travel time from Bakersfield to Sacramento in half.

Despite my support for the concept, however, it's time to reconsider support for high-speed rail in its current manifestation.

That manifestation came under scrutiny last week, when the Assembly Transportation Committee held an oversight hearing on high-speed rail.

The most recent high-speed rail business plan puts the cost for the project at nearly \$100 billion.

Earlier this year, the price tag on 119 miles of track through the Central Valley was increased to \$10.8 billion, a \$2.8 billion increase from the previous budget, and 180 percent of the original \$6 billion construction estimate.

Adding insult to injury, the High Speed Rail Authority admits that there are significant “funding gaps” in their current business plan. Gaps they are hoping to fill at some point in the future.

Assemblyman Vince Fong, the Transportation Committee’s vice chairman, told fellow committee members he believes California’s taxpayers do not truly understand the gap between the funds the state has to build the project and the funds actually required.

Yet high-speed rail continues to receive additional funding and construction proceeds. Budget overruns, schedule delays and shrinking passenger projections be damned.

This type of behavior is beyond careless. It is a downright reckless use of taxpayer resources.

It’s not hard to understand the frustration felt by California farmers when they see bullet train tracks built through their fields while other critically needed projects continue to be held up.

You know the projects: dams. The ones those “dams not trains” signs refer to.

Maybe you’re like me. Despite being a Kern County kid, I’ll admit I never really understood or appreciated our state’s need for more water storage.

Until recently, I was oblivious to how our state’s water is supplied. I knew our local farmers needed a lot of water to grow their crops, but that’s why we have canals, aqueducts and a dry Kern River. Drinking water came through a network of pipes and pumps to reach my faucet.

We needed to “pray for rain” to end the drought.

It wasn’t until the last drought that I learned, when it comes to meeting California’s growing water needs, rain isn’t good enough.

I hope my friends in the water industry can excuse my naïveté.

Our ability to meet year-round water needs — both agricultural and municipal — is determined by the amount of water we can store. And, our water storage capacity is determined largely by snowpack and reservoirs.

One of those is beyond our control. For example, spring rainstorms can drench the state, but not result in much increase to snowpack. That means losing out on a lot of water that could otherwise help meet our water supply needs.

Since we can’t control weather patterns, the logical thing to do would be to invest in more dams, better dams and bigger reservoirs.

Since the 1990s, the state of California has discussed construction of two new reservoirs, Temperance Flat and Sites. The reservoirs would increase statewide water storage capacity by more than 3 million acre-feet, a 6 percent increase from the state's current 50 million acre-feet surface storage capacity.

In 2007, the Department of Water Resources claimed that both projects could be completed by 2019 for a cost of \$4.5 billion. Current estimates put the combined costs for the projects at \$7.9 billion.

That's right. The state's two largest water storage projects in nearly 40 years could be built for almost \$3 billion less than a simple stretch of high-speed rail from Madera to Kern County.

But, despite voter approval of a \$7.5 billion water bond in 2014, both reservoir projects remain stalled.

This is nonsense.

If Sacramento continues to write blank checks to fund construction of a massively over-budget bullet train, the least they could do is release voter-approved bond funds for increased water storage.

High-speed rail is about convenience; water is a basic human need.

Where do I get my "dams not trains" sign?

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