

Metrolink proposes new trains from Burbank to Anaheim, using billions from bullet train

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OCT. 9, 2019

Ridership on Metrolink would double between Burbank and Anaheim, relieving freeway congestion, and new high-speed electric trains would slash emissions along the route under a plan that would shift up to \$5.5 billion from the bullet train project in the Central Valley to Southern California.

Metrolink outlined these improvements to the commuter rail system in an internal report it submitted to the California High-Speed Rail Authority, which is weighing a decision over the next several months to direct some of the \$20.5 billion in funding for the bullet train to Southern California and the Bay Area.

Budget increases, construction delays, technical problems and management turmoil involving the bullet train project have undermined political support and prompted Southern California legislators to question the existing plan to pour all of the remaining funds into the troubled Central Valley segment.

Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon (D-Lakewood) said he favored a concept that would put investments in urban areas with the greatest potential payoffs in terms of carrying passengers, relieving highway congestion and reducing pollution.

The Burbank-to-Anaheim corridor is part of the future bullet train system, so an investment in it is not a diversion of money from the statewide system, legislative staff said.

“We have a market here that is excited about high-speed rail,” Metrolink Chief Executive Stephanie Wiggins said in a July interview. “There is a great synergy with Metrolink.”

The idea has gained momentum among Southern California legislators, whose votes could be decisive in a political showdown. Gov. Gavin Newsom, who backed the Central Valley plan in his first State of the State speech this year, has been silent on the matter for months.

Under the rough plan, all of the existing construction work along 119 miles in the Central Valley would be completed and track would be installed, but without an electrical system.

The San Joaquin Valley Joint Powers Authority, which operates the Amtrak system in the Central Valley, would run high-speed diesel trains that would link up with existing service into the Bay Area for the foreseeable future. That would theoretically free up about \$5 billion to \$6 billion to invest in passenger rail elsewhere in the state.

The high-speed rail board in May asked for a comparison of the transportation and air quality benefits of sharing some of the funding with Southern California and the Bay Area, rather than building an electrically powered rail segment from Merced to Bakersfield, as Newsom suggested.

A preliminary side-by-side analysis of the investment options is scheduled to be presented to the bullet train board next week by Deutsche Bahn, a German rail firm that is a paid consultant as the bullet train's "early train operator." No decision is expected at that meeting, however.

Metrolink operates over 538 miles of track in Southern California, ranking it as the nation's third-largest commuter rail system. It owns its own tracks north of downtown to Burbank and beyond, but uses freight tracks south to Anaheim under a sharing agreement that often slows down passenger movements. The investment plan would increase capacity to 80 freight trains and 50 passenger trains every week day, the report said.

Metrolink did not make the report public, but The Times obtained a copy. It projects that the current 1.8 million passengers that ride the 45-mile route through downtown Los Angeles from Burbank to Anaheim would double by 2024, based on increased schedules, faster trains and fewer conflicts with freight consists along the way.

The speeds would not be as high as the planned 220-mph trains that the bullet train agency has planned, but could reach up to 125 mph along certain segments of the route.

The report does not disclose what type of zero-emission technology would be used, but officials familiar with the plan say it would probably be an adaptation of battery-operated passenger trains now being introduced in Europe. The report said the agency planned to use 44 zero-emission train sets, costing \$1.2 billion, and would also build a new maintenance facility to service them.

The battery systems would avoid a multibillion-dollar program of building an overhead high-voltage power system, which freight railroads oppose because of the impact on double-stacked container cars.

Over the next three decades, the rail improvements would reduce carbon dioxide gases by 2.3 million metric tons, and also reduce nitrogen oxides and particulates, the report said.

If the state does make investments in Metrolink, it “has the potential to unlock new federal investments,” the report says.

The Metrolink report contains a list of projects that would add tracks, signals, sidings and 15 improved highway crossings that would speed up train movements. The largest investments would be \$1 billion for express tracks from Burbank to Los Angeles, \$1.4 billion for track into BNSF’s massive Hobart Yard in Commerce, and a \$1.5 billion new track system for Union Station in downtown Los Angeles.

The bullet train project has encountered its stiffest opposition in the Central Valley, where hundreds of land acquisitions have angered farmers owning highly productive farm fields.

But conservative politicians also are concerned that a diversion of funds out of the Central Valley could leave the project half completed with urban Fresno torn up, rural highway bridges incomplete and nothing to show for the \$15-billion expenditure.

At the same time, some environmental groups are leery of a plan to continue running diesel trains in the Central Valley, where air quality is often on a par with Los Angeles and rates of adolescent asthma are high.

Annie Parker, a spokeswoman for the state rail authority, said the agency has been conducting meetings with Southern California agencies about investments and has gathered data from the Bay Area as well. Additional meetings will occur and the various reports will contribute to a new business plan that will be issued next year, she said.