

San Jose's high-speed rail should go underground

By Henry Cord and Jean Dresden

High-speed rail bureaucrats want to deny San Jose an underground train option, instead proposing tracks and station structures as high as nine stories towering over our community.

These same advocates also boast San Jose's downtown transit station will have the most "multi-modal" connections west of the Mississippi River, but if this transportation center is truly expected to be the "standard to which others are compared," then the option to build underground in San Jose must be preserved.

City leaders worked hard to convince high-speed rail powers to route the rail through San Jose via Pacheco and not Altamont Pass. Now, those same leaders need to ensure high-speed rail designs do not divide key neighborhoods in their city, including downtown.

At issue is a staff decision reported to the California High Speed Rail Authority Board on Dec. 3 and supported by San Jose's Rod Diridon, the former county supervisor who is a powerful supporter of high-speed rail. The decision would essentially eliminate any consideration of putting the San Jose high-speed rail corridor underground.

Diridon and some engineers have apparently already decided that San Jose's underground alternative is not possible and too expensive. With little to no engagement of our local elected officials or community stakeholders, high-speed rail officials have discarded the tunnel option before weighing the issues.

Besides showing an obvious lack of respect for San Jose, the decision also seems knee-jerk, considering that BART already plans to tunnel in the same area. More study of the underground feasibility is obviously needed.

With all due respect to Diridon, for whom the San Jose Caltrain station is named, this is a decision the City Council needs to vet. The council-created Diridon Good Neighbor Committee unanimously opposed abandoning the underground option at its Dec. 7 meeting.

The problem is that the remaining “workable” high speed rail staff recommendations essentially divide our city with a gargantuan structure. The engineers propose an overhead station and train tracks that would create a potential barrier through central San Jose. In addition to being 87 feet tall, the train station platform would be more than a half-mile long and almost a football field wide.

This cannot be solely an engineer’s cost-saving decision. This matter is also about doing what is right and in the best interest of the community from long-range aesthetic, quality-of-life and economic points of view.

Think about the Embarcadero Freeway in San Francisco which separated downtown from the waterfront and the equally deficient Cypress Structure in Oakland. After the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, they both were eventually removed, and the areas they once blighted have been transformed into magnificent urban spaces.

Here in San Jose, train officials have regrettably suggested building something even larger and potentially more divisive and unappealing. These engineers are not thinking about a community’s practical realities – maneuvering each day through or around imposing structures, or attracting future real estate investors. A massive trestle platform with overhead railways is not the way our city becomes more fluid and livable – nor does it enhance the connections between midtown neighborhoods and the downtown core.

We suggest the City Council conduct a high-speed rail study session, and then make sure the underground proposal in San Jose is alive when alternative alignment Environmental Impact Reports are started in 2010. The council may also want to hire its own independent geologists and engineers, as the City of Palo Alto has done.

The Council needs to get out in front of this train before it leaves a nine-story-tall station.

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