

U.S.

# In Silicon Valley, Caltrain Upgrade Is Imperiled as Trump Withholds Funds

By THOMAS FULLER MARCH 6, 2017

SAN FRANCISCO — The engineers of Silicon Valley are fine-tuning driverless cars, building robots designed to replicate the human brain and shaving milliseconds off internet response times.

Their trip to work, however, can be a throwback to the predigital age. The region's commuter rail line is saddled with aging, smoke-spewing, diesel-powered locomotives.

For more than a decade, the managers of the Silicon Valley railway, known as Caltrain, have been planning to upgrade to faster and less polluting electric trains.

But those plans are now imperiled by the Trump administration's decision in February to withhold a \$647 million federal grant.

In this impasse, some transportation experts see a foretaste of the political infighting and financial hurdles that could plague the nationwide infrastructure projects that President Trump is promising. Reviving America's rusted and sagging infrastructure is one of the few areas where it seemed Democrats and Republicans could agree. But making these projects a reality — the “new roads, bridges, tunnels, airports and railways gleaming across our beautiful land” that Mr. Trump enumerated to Congress last week — will require political cooperation and accommodations that are increasingly rare in ultrapartisan times.

In the case of Caltrain, the decision to withhold the grant came after California's Republican congressional delegation asked the transportation secretary, Elaine L. Chao, to withdraw funding because the electrified system also would be used for the state's bigger high-speed rail project, a plan they vehemently oppose.

The high-speed rail line connecting San Francisco to Los Angeles is the most ambitious

rail plan in the country and has been in the works for more than two decades with a projected cost of \$64 billion. The project calls for completion in 2029.

Despite initial support, Republicans now regard the high-speed project as too costly.

“We have said no more federal dollars will go to California high-speed rail,” said Representative Jeff Denham, a Republican who is chairman of the House Subcommittee on Railroads. “We’re very strong on that position.”

In an interview, Mr. Denham said the project should immediately stop.

There has long been tension in California between advocates of more freeways and those favoring public transport. But the high-speed rail project had bipartisan support in its early stages. It was formally started in 1996 by Republican Gov. Pete Wilson and was supported by another Republican governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

That consensus is long gone. The letter penned by the state’s 14 Republican members of Congress, including Kevin McCarthy, the House majority leader, called the project a “boondoggle” and described the Caltrain grant as an “irresponsible use of taxpayer dollars.”

Caltrain and the high-speed rail project are administratively separate, but a 2013 agreement to share tracks as a cost-saving measure raised Republican ire.

Defunding the electrification of the Silicon Valley corridor has immediate consequences for the system’s 65,000 daily commuters. Caltrain had hoped to switch to its electric system by 2021. The current trains are overcrowded and breakdowns are frequent; there are more than 19 mechanical failures per month, according to Caltrain engineers. Two-thirds of the fleet has “reached the end of its useful life,” Caltrain says.

At the rail line’s maintenance depot, engineers say they have trouble finding parts for the locomotives, which were built in the 1980s. And new maintenance workers need lectures from veteran technicians because they have no experience working on such old equipment.

“You change out parts here and there,” said Joe Navarro, director of operations and maintenance at Caltrain. “We are putting Band-Aids on. It’s very challenging.”

Getting to work by car or bus is often not a better alternative in Silicon Valley. A recent study found that the San Francisco Bay Area has the nation’s third-most-congested roads.

“We are lucky to live in a place where innovation is in the DNA, but we don’t see that

for public transport,” said Sridhar Iyer, a software engineer for Twitter who rides the double-decker Caltrain that runs near the headquarters of Apple, Facebook and Google. “The whole thing is stuck in the past.”

In recent weeks, more than a dozen leaders of Silicon Valley firms called lawmakers to urge that the federal money be released for the Caltrain electrification project, according to Carl Guardino, the president of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, which represents most of the region’s large tech companies.

Mr. Guardino called the Republican campaign to block funding “a misinformed effort.”

“The most important asset of the innovation economy are our employees,” he said. “When they are stuck and stalled in traffic they are not productively creating the future.”

The specific objection by Republicans is that \$600 million of state funds allocated to Caltrain’s electrification were initially authorized by a 2008 referendum on high-speed rail, known as Proposition 1A.

“They are stealing Prop 1A money and using it for something else,” Mr. Denham said.

Caltrain says that although the two trains will use the same tracks, the electrification project is “independent” and high-speed rail’s use of the corridor will require a separate environmental review.

The bigger picture, proponents of the electrification project say, is that the commuter rail project deserves the support of the Trump administration because it meets the broad criteria of its infrastructure push — it will be made in America by American workers. Almost all of the materials for the new train system will be sourced from factories across 14 states. Caltrain estimates the project will create nearly 10,000 jobs.

“This is the perfect project if you care about infrastructure, if you care about jobs and if you care about focusing on areas that are going to deliver long-term economic benefit,” said Stuart Cohen, the executive director of TransForm, a nonprofit group that advocates public transportation.

The state High-Speed Rail Authority is making a similar pitch. “Every ounce of the steel, every ounce of the concrete is domestic,” Dan Richard, the authority’s chairman, said. “We are reaching out to the Trump administration to make the case that this is entirely consistent with the president’s vision.”

An opinion poll by the Public Policy Institute of California last year showed a slim majority of respondents — 52 percent — support the high-speed rail project.

Outside Fresno, a city in California's Central Valley surrounded by almond and fruit orchards and racked by poverty, about 1,000 workers have been employed on the project to build viaducts and tunnels at 10 construction sites.

The Finance Department of Gov. Jerry Brown, a Democrat, decided on Friday that the project was ready to lay some track and approved \$2.6 billion in spending. But there are lingering questions about how the later stages of the project will be financed, especially if Congress blocks more federal support.

Although the authority was established more than two decades ago it was only in 2013 that construction began on the first, 119-mile segment of the project.

Mayor Lee Brand of Fresno, a Republican, supports the project, which would make Silicon Valley a 45-minute train ride away by 2025.

"I don't look at this ideologically," Mr. Brand said. "I look at it practically. The city of Fresno can enjoy a major benefit from what's going on with high-speed rail. This is a poor city that needs all the help it can get."

Tom Richards, a real estate developer in Fresno who is on the authority's board, said the rail connection could encourage tech companies to set up in the city and workers to commute to well-paying jobs in Silicon Valley.

"This is a whole story about connecting California together," he said.

Susan Beachy contributed research.

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