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High-speed rail — Do it right!

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Like many people who have been involved in the discussion over high-speed rail, I was pleased — even relieved — by the decision of the Federal Railroad Administration to require the California High-Speed Rail Authority (CHSRA) to assign federal high-speed rail money to be spent in the state's Central Valley, rather than along the Peninsula Caltrain right-of-way.

For the CHSRA and local communities, this decision presents the opportunity to put everything back on the table and get the project done right.

In essence, it's a chance to hit the pause button on the Peninsula segment.

In November 2008, 52 percent of California voters approved Proposition 1A, the \$9.95 billion bond measure that provides a portion of the funds the state will need to construct a high-speed rail system from Los Angeles to San Francisco. Support for Proposition 1A in both San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties exceeded 60 percent.

I voted for Proposition 1A because it seemed then, and still seems now, to be good public policy.

High-speed rail done right has the potential to meet the future transportation demands of California's growing population by providing a green alternative to new freeway lanes and airport runways.

Unfortunately, by rushing to meet the federal funding deadlines, CHSRA prematurely began making choices about how the system would be constructed on the Peninsula, including designating some areas for aerial structures, some for underground. Residents were left with the feeling that there was no serious consideration of those options that would better protect the quality of life in our Peninsula communities.

No one should be surprised by the fierce local opposition to one of the proposed alignment plans to run high-speed rail on an elevated track down portions of the Caltrain right-of-way, the spine of the Peninsula.

Had the CHSRA staff listened to local leaders or done their homework, they would have known that Peninsula residents have a long history of scrutinizing development and infrastructure proposals. We support projects that we believe will enhance our quality of life and we fight projects that won't. It is fair to question whether the quality of Peninsula communities will be improved by an elevated track.

By leaving these questions effectively unresolved and in its haste to obtain federal funding and build momentum for the project, CHSRA left many feeling, legitimately, that their concerns had been given short shrift.

The CHSRA has also been slow to fully address issues that have been raised by the legislative analyst and the peer review group. Serious questions have been posed, such as these: Is the business plan realistic? Are the ridership assumptions accurate? What will the project cost?

As a result, the CHSRA has alienated many ardent supporters of high-speed rail.

Now that the pause button has been hit for the Peninsula segment the CHSRA has the opportunity to build trust, answer critical questions and work effectively with our Peninsula communities.

I call upon the CHSRA to make clear its intention on the following serious issues:

- 1). To work collaboratively with Peninsula communities;
- 2). To reaffirm its commitment to work in partnership with the Caltrain Joint Powers Board;
- 3). To ensure the scope of the Draft Environmental Impact Report includes phased construction options, covered trenches and a deep-bored tunnel, before it is released;
- 4). To fund a process for all cities to participate in the long-term planning of the Caltrain right-of-way, study potential development opportunities and discuss design guidelines. This step is essential if CHSRA wants these communities to assess what high-speed rail can do for us, not just to us;
- 5). Provide a specific timetable for updating the Statewide Business Plan and the Ridership Study;
- 6). Provide full responses to the Legislative Analyst and Peer Review findings.

Peninsula cities must also take responsibility to work through their differences and develop a seamless alignment proposal that will benefit all and be worthy of support from all.

We have a precious opportunity to reconsider the development of a Peninsula rail service that will enhance our quality of life. Let us take full advantage of it to provide for the future needs of our communities and our residents.

Jerry Hill represents seven cities along the Caltrain right-of-way as the 19th District member of the state Assembly. He is the author of Assembly Bill 41, a bill to require California High-Speed Rail Authority Board Members to publicly declare potential conflicts during board meetings and leave the room before deliberations.