

McCarthy backs plan to redirect bullet train money to improve Highway 99

By John Cox, Californian staff writer

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A new threat to California's bullet train plans surfaced Thursday as lawmakers including Congressman Kevin McCarthy introduced legislation that seeks to take away more than \$2 billion in federal stimulus money set aside for the project and spend it making repairs to Highway 99.

If approved by Congress and signed by President Obama, the San Joaquin Valley Transportation Enhancement Act would, at a minimum, seriously delay the California High-Speed Rail Project, estimated to cost at least \$43 billion, some say much more. But the legislation would also provide necessary funding for a project already in the works that promises benefits to the Central Valley.

It was unclear which project might provide the most economic help locally. Kern County stands to gain tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars worth of construction and other jobs from the proposed bullet train. On the other hand, improving the 99 would invest no more than about \$60 million in Kern, by one estimate.

A press release posted on the website of Devin Nunes, R-Tulare, announcing the legislation said that redirecting the stimulus money to establish a six-lane freeway from Bakersfield to Sacramento would improve the corridor's safety and enhance the [region's air quality](#).

Nunes, along with the two other congressmen who introduced the proposal -- McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, and Jeff Denham, R-Atwater -- could not be reached for comment late Thursday.

A spokeswoman for the California High-Speed Rail Authority declined to comment on the legislation.

One of California high-speed rail's biggest proponents, Congressman Jim Costa, D-Fresno, released a statement arguing that improving the 99 is not incompatible with building the bullet train, expected to link the northern and southern parts of the state with trains traveling as fast as 220 mph by 2020.

Costa noted that he has long supported turning the 99 into an entirely six-lane freeway with interstate designation and full safety features.

Recently, McCarthy and other Republicans in Congress have stepped up their criticism of the bullet train, questioning its financial viability and management in particular, even as Obama has pushed for greater federal spending on high-speed rail as a job-creating infrastructure investment.

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin, a key high-speed rail supporter, complimented Nunes "for thinking out of the box and making sure those dollars stay in the Valley" in statements to The Fresno Bee.

Still, Swearengin told the newspaper, the key is making sure the line is built.

"I think that our congressional delegation should be focused on streamlining the federal permitting process for high-speed rail in California," she said.

"That would lower the cost of the train system and still allow us the economic boost that we know is going to come from high-speed rail."

According to The Bee, Nunes is hoping for local support to sway California's two Democratic senators -- Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer. If his bill makes it out of the Republican-controlled House, it would likely face a rockier road in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

Funding questions

Some questioned whether redirecting the stimulus money could even be accomplished, given the restrictions placed on it.

"It is not transportation money. Transportation money comes from the gas tax and the Highway Trust Fund," said Ron Brummett, executive director of the Kern Council of Governments and a careful observer of the high-speed rail project.

Terms of the stimulus money require that it be "obligated" by the end of next year, Brummett said, meaning that its environmental review and design would need to be finished by that time.

While the rail project appears to be on track to meet that deadline, preparations for making Highway 99 a six-lane freeway may not be far enough along to qualify, Brummett said.

A few years ago, he said, the cost of turning Highway 99 into an interstate freeway was estimated at about \$16.5 billion. But with certain waivers and promises to meet federal standards at a later time, the project was pegged at about \$6 billion, he said.

Such a project has been floated repeatedly as a way of addressing the fact that Fresno and Bakersfield are the two largest U.S. metropolitan areas not served by an interstate freeway, a designation that comes with safety and construction standards, Brummett said. Turning it into an interstate could help attract businesses and jobs, he said.

Most of the work required to turn the 99 into an interstate would need to be done in the northern part of the valley, Brummett said. The only work that would have to be accomplished in Kern, he said, is an interchange at Hosking Avenue south of Bakersfield and widening the 99 between about Olive Drive and 7th Standard Road.

He said those two projects would benefit Kern by about \$50 to \$60 million.

"To Kern County, the benefit of converting that (stimulus) money from high-speed rail to 99 ... doesn't do much for us," he said.

He also noted that the other infrastructure projects required to make the 99 an interstate do not appear to be far enough along to meet the 2012 deadline.