

California Rail News

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Vallejo Ferry–Napa Valley “NVLink”

2003 Passenger Rail Plan Omitted Private Sector, Misunderstood Markets

By Michael D. Setty
and
Lance Burris

TRAC’s passenger rail plan described here manages tourism and helps protect the Napa Valley’s quality of life.

Introduction

Rail service in the Napa Valley began a few years after completion of the Transcontinental Railroad. In fact, for a time in the late 19th Century, the existing Jamison Canyon rail segment was part of the original Transcontinental Railroad. The Southern Pacific operated passenger trains until the late 1920’s between Vallejo, Napa, St. Helena, and Calistoga, with a ferry link to San Francisco. Electric trains ran adjacent to the SP starting in the early 20th Century, operating from Vallejo and over the length of the Napa Valley until the late 1930’s.

Southern Pacific freight service operated until the mid-1980’s, when the line was purchased by Vincent DeDomenico of “Rice-A-Roni” fame. He renamed it the Napa Valley Railroad and operated it as the Napa Valley Wine Train (NVWT) (www.winetrain.com). The Wine Train, an idea originated by locals, operates to this day. DeDomenico was far-sighted enough to see that his railroad would one day play a major role in helping preserve the Napa Valley: He insisted that Caltrans construct the Trancas Avenue railroad bridge over Highway 29, and that the Napa Valley Flood Control Project include new railroad bridges over the Napa River and the Downtown Flood Bypass. Without



Mockup of a possible train serving the Vallejo Ferry Terminal to Napa Valley market.

these key infrastructure upgrades, the Napa Valley Railroad would be a historical footnote.

In mid-March 2025, the Napa Valley Transportation Authority (NVTa) approved a partnership with the Solano Transportation Authority (STA) to conduct a \$250,000 consultant study of rail passenger service between the Vallejo Ferry Terminal and the City of Napa. TRAC’s NVLink proposal is meant to help the pending study become a real project, given the authors’ knowledge and experience with local travel markets and Napa Valley tourism patterns.

In many U.S. national parks, high-quality transit service helps mitigate the negative impacts of too many cars, reducing the associated congestion suffered by visitors and locals alike. In the same way that visitors can

make reservations for Napa Valley hotels, wineries tours and tastings, and restaurants, visitors will be able to

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Vallejo Ferry Terminal to Napa Valley Rail

reserve seats on the train. Like other tourism assets, trains have limited seating, so reservations can help “even out” tourist demand during the peak season and on peak days to mitigate crowding.

TRAC’s Napa Valley Link proposal envisions a spectrum of rail passenger and associated shuttle services covering all price points. Basic rail service would operate every 30 minutes all day most of the year, seven days per week over the 32-mile route between the Vallejo Ferry Terminal and St. Helena. A maximum of 4 million tourists per year are anticipated in the Napa Valley, somewhat above current (2025) levels. This is about what the Napa Valley can absorb without increasing the already massive impacts of tourism. NVLink could initially divert 8%-10% of current tourist volumes. A longer-term objective might increase this proportion to 20%+, but that would require investment in more trains, longer station platforms, and other capacity increases.

Generally, two-car trains would be operated. One car of each train would provide basic transit-type service for residents and budget travelers. The other car would provide higher fare “First-Class” accommodations for less budget-constrained visitors; these cars would include mid-range food and wine offerings. This would be coordinated through an online app offering the full spectrum of Napa Valley visitor services, including winery tours and tastings, restaurant reservations, hotel and spa reservations, and so forth.

The First-Class cars would accommodate outside tour operators, though visitors could also arrange their own “personal tours” if they wished. The First-Class cars would offset train operating expenses, enabling NVlink to be run at a reasonable profit.

In any case, current Wine Train offerings would continue. Their services—lunch, dinner, wine and meal tour trains, special themed trains, etc. generate much revenue and are very well-established. While remaining mostly a single-track line, rail infrastructure would be expanded to accommodate additional services by adding passing tracks, stations, and other fixed investment needed for all-day, half-hour service.

Infrastructure Upgrades

This proposal’s goal is to keep NVLink’s total cost to about \$400 million in 2025 dollars, covering track upgrades, new stations, maintenance facility improvements, and trains tailored for both locals and tourists. That \$400 million cap fits the Federal Transit Administration’s “Small Starts” program perfectly.

Going over that amount triggers a tougher planning process with the FTA. Their “New Starts” funding is a battleground for big players like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, all chasing billions for massive projects. Sticking to Small Starts keeps things simpler.

Here’s the funding breakdown: the FTA can chip in up to \$150 million for a Small Starts project. The other \$250 million would come from state,

regional, local, and private sources. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) might help too, though FRA funding will be very competitive under the current administration. The tourist portion of the service should be attractive to private sector rail operators, as it is likely to have excellent profit potential by serving tourists at all budgets—not just the \$250–\$800 Wine Train offerings serving the top 5%-10% of visitors. Private sector participation would increase chances of obtaining federal funding.

Upgrade Existing Tracks

Back in 2003, the *Napa/Solano Passenger/Freight Rail Study* by R.L. Banks & Associates and LTK Engineering figured it would cost around \$70-\$80 million to upgrade the tracks, signals, and other rail basics between Vallejo and St. Helena. Adjust that for inflation—about 125-130% from 2003 to now—and that’s \$160–180 million in today’s money. That’s just for the tracks, though; stations, rolling stock, and maintenance upgrades will be discussed later.

Switching to concrete ties and new welded rails could add up to \$50 million, but that’s overkill. Why not fix things incrementally as the old rails and ties wear out?

The plan is to upgrade tracks from Tennessee Street in Vallejo to St. Helena from 15–30 mph for passenger trains to a fast Class 3 that allows a maximum speed of 59 mph. It’s a proven railroad strategy, straight out of the 2003 study’s playbook: swap out crossties as needed, patch up or replace rails, and beef up the ballast underneath. Engineering and management? That can be just 10% of the cost—5% each—since there’s more than a century of railroad know-how to lean on.

To run trains every 30 minutes both ways, six trainsets are needed, plus spares, plus schedule room for the Wine Train to keep running its current offerings. There are seven sidings—spots where trains can pass—between Tennessee Street and St. Helena, including some Union Pacific tracks

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It's Now Time to Shut Down CA's HSR Project



Breaking: Trump Administration Won't Fund California's High Speed Rail

**By David Schonbrunn
TRAC Vice President**

TRAC's mission got a big shot in the arm today when President Trump announced "The government is not going to pay" for California's High-Speed Rail project. This should force legislators to "get real." Without federal money falling from the skies, there's no way the State can afford to keep building this boondoggle. It's over- \$100 billion pricetag is simply unaffordable. It's time to gracefully bring this project to an end, and stop throwing good money after bad. Ending the huge drain of state funding going to HSR will allow the state to go back to building cost-effective rail lines to serve passengers, TRAC's reason for existing.

Here's why the highly politicized project never had a chance of succeeding:

The 2008 HSR Bond Measure was premised on a third of the investment in HSR coming from the private sector. The absence of private investors in the project 17 years after the bond measure was passed by voters proves that it cannot succeed. Potential investors stayed away, obviously concluding they could not make a profit. Without private capital, a California High-Speed Rail (HSR) system cannot be built. It's too costly to be built with just state and federal funds.

HSR is a Viable Business

California HSR is an attractive business, if approached with cost-consciousness (California High-Speed Rail Authority's (CHSRA) plans are vastly more expensive than necessary). We were present for the dress rehearsal of the presentation made by the American subsidiary of the French National Railways, SNCF, to the CHSRA in October 2010. The SNCF Powerpoint addressed what SNCF saw as the key weakness of the CHSRA project—its insistence on building the initial system without private capital and without the direct involvement of a firm with HSR operating experience. The presentation suggested that CHSRA use the structure of a Pre-Development Agreement to bring an experienced operator on board immediately to direct the project. SNCF was accompanied

by a major U.S. investment bank that was ready to fund the construction of the San Francisco to Los Angeles phase of the project without a ridership guarantee.

A major condition of its proposal was SNCF's insistence that it select its own route. While part of the Pre-Development process was to refine a route, SNCF had tentatively concluded that I-5 would be much a faster--and straighter--route than the politically distorted route approved by the Authority—as well as much less expensive and less disruptive to build. SNCF believed the Authority's route to be a money-loser, and would not accept ridership risk for it. Note that, despite all the talk about the merits and demerits of an I-5 route, the SNCF proposal was not premised on a specific route. It proposed a process to bring in private capital and an experienced operator.

CHSRA did everything possible to discredit and bury the LA Times story on the SNCF proposal, going so far as to reach back into history to tie the railroad to the Holocaust. With all the slurs flying around, it is important to note that SNCF was not asking CHSRA to turn the project over to it. They were instead asking that CHSRA establish a Request for Qualifications process, leading to an open Request for Proposals process, which would result in the selection of an operator. They were fine with the possibility that the winning proposer could be another firm.

CHSRA Chooses the Dark Side

Had the CHSRA been operating in the public interest, it would have held public hearings on the proposal and on the desirability of setting aside its favored route. **The line would probably be operating now between LA and SF**, with an international HSR operator selected through an open bidding process. This would have been consistent with the business model recommendations of the High-Speed Rail Peer Review Group in their very first letter, which stressed the importance of the participation of the HSR operator throughout the design process. Instead, CHSRA kept the proposal secret and continued pushing

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Coast Observations

CHSRA's new CEO believes he can attract private sector financing to finish the HSR line to Gilroy and Lancaster/Palmdale. The problem is CHSRA is prohibited by law from offering the ridership guarantees being demanded. This effort looks to TRAC like whistling past the graveyard.....**SAN DIEGO COUNTY'S NORTH COUNTY TRANSIT DISTRICT (NCTD) HAS PROPOSED REPLACING ITS CURRENT SPRINTER DMU FLEET. NCTD claims the Sprinter fleet, unique in North America, is increasingly difficult and costly to maintain, and that parts are hard to obtain. NCTD claims the 12-train fleet will require \$350 million to replace. To us, this seems way out of line. It is far more than rail operators in Texas and Canada have been paying for new equipment. We hope "HSRitis" (sic) isn't now spreading to California transit operators...ANTI-RAIL CRANK WENDELL COX MAY BE RIGHT ABOUT CALIFORNIA HSR. In a report from a nonprofit that he apparently created recently, Cox claims that California HSR is likely to cost at least \$200 billion if it follows its current course, and that full service may not start until 2045 if the system is actually completed. (TRAC doesn't believe that will ever happen.) We hate it when cranks like Cox are likely right...TRANSPORTATION FOR AMERICA FOUND IT COSTS \$12,000 PER YEAR TO OPERATE A CAR. New cars now cost an average of \$48,401 in 2025, up 30% since 2018. Non-drivers pay plenty, too: Congress has subsidized the Highway Trust Fund with \$275 billion in general funds since 2008. They also pay for the "free" parking that is "baked in" to rent, groceries, and other living expenses...THE \$2 BILLION INGLEWOOD PEOPLE MOVER WAS CANCELED, when it lost key political support last year. The replacement plan is for bus lanes in the area. Local transit advocates have a better plan: a Crenshaw Line spur. While a spur would cost a few hundred million dollars, it would have vastly more capacity than buses...THE THREAT TO TRANSIT FROM RIDESHARING? A group called the State Smart Transportation Initiative found that most Uber, Lyft, and other ridesharing services found people like ridesharing's flexibility, particularly when transit is infrequent. To successfully to compete for passengers, more frequent transit is needed. This may help eliminate some of the excessive traffic caused by ridesharing, let alone future chaos caused by robotaxis foisted on the public by Google, Musk et al...WHILE ELON MUSK HAS DONE WELL WITH ROCKETS AND BATTERIES, HIS MOVES TOWARDS ROBOTAXIS HAVE SOME CONCERNED. Some analysts point out that Musk believes millions of Tesla "Cybercabs" could be sold, but actually may be "only" hundreds of thousands. This is a concern for those who prefer real solutions over robotaxi hype. On a positive note, some cities and states are starting to ban robot taxis and other "self-driving" vehicles, even though Trump's Transportation Secretary has just thrown a sop to Musk by establishing a Federal robocar "policy framework."**

Vallejo Ferry Terminal to Napa Valley Passenger

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south of Kaiser Road in South Napa. Those sidings would get the same upgrade treatment as the main line. Two or three more would be added if needed. Switches would be upgraded to remote control or “spring switches” to keep northbound and southbound trains flowing smoothly.

Construct 0.75 Mile Extension to Vallejo Ferry Terminal

Right now, the tracks veer to Mare Island at Georgia Street—0.75 miles shy of the Vallejo Ferry Terminal. They would be extended south with a single track along Mare Island Way, ending in a double-track station right next to the ferry dock. New signals would be tied into the existing traffic signals there, to sync up with Mare Island Way and Tennessee Street traffic. A budget of \$10–20 million would be sufficient for a Ferry Terminal station, depending on the elaborateness of the design and the roadway upgrades needed.

Signaling and Grade Crossings

Grade crossings—where tracks meet roads—would be upgraded along the route as needed, adding better train detection and smoothing out those intersections. For instance, the “track circuits” that spot oncoming trains would be adjusted to handle faster speeds and lighter passenger trains.

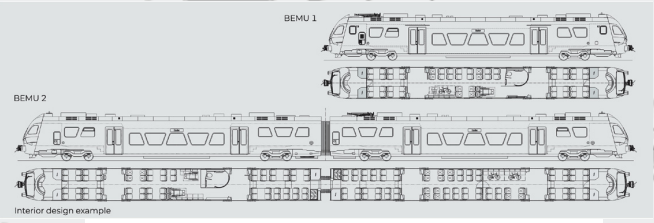
Since passenger and freight trains need to share tracks, mostly in Vallejo, federal rules call for Positive Train Control (PTC) to allow passenger and freight trains to coexist. A radio-based version of PTC would skip expensive trackside signals and cables, using smart radio tech instead. That would cut upfront costs, ease maintenance, and stop thieves from stealing copper wires and other gear.

New Stations

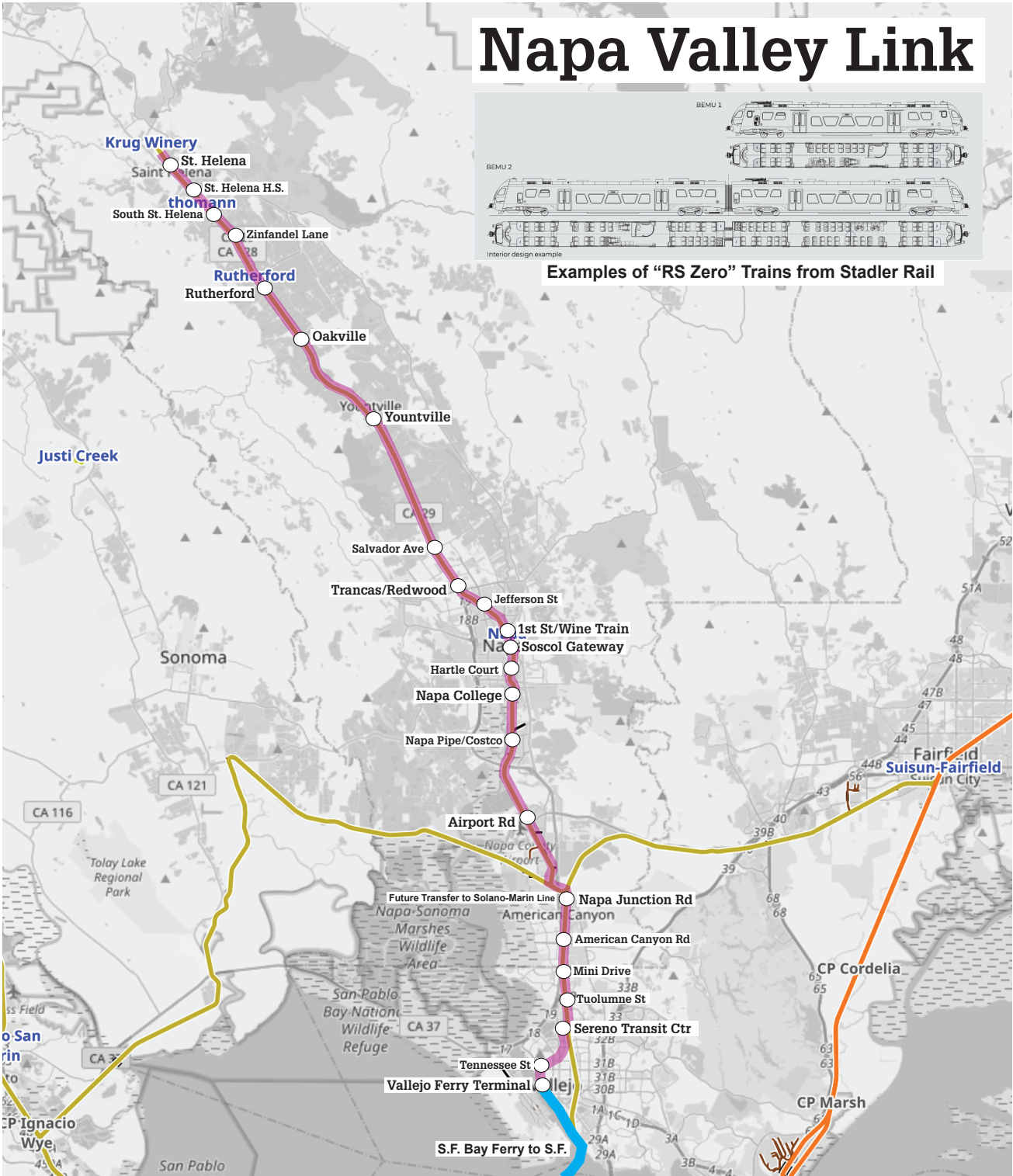
New stops are proposed at:

- Vallejo Ferry Terminal
- Tennessee Street/Mare Island Way
- Sereno Drive
- Tuolumne Street
- Mini Drive
- American Canyon Road
- Napa Junction Road (future transfer)
- Airport Boulevard
- Napa Pipe/Costco
- Napa Valley College
- Hartle Court (S. Napa Marketplace)
- 3rd Street/Soscol Gateway
- 1st St/Wine Train Station
- Jefferson Street
- Trancas Street/Redwood Street
- Salvador Avenue
- Yountville
- Oakville
- Rutherford
- Zinfandel Lane

Napa Valley Link



Examples of “RS Zero” Trains from Stadler Rail



Potential NVLink rail passenger service connecting the Vallejo Ferry Terminal to the Napa Valley.

- South St. Helena
- St. Helena High School
- St. Helena Downtown

Service could also be extended to Krug Winery/Deer Park Road to provide for bus links to Calistoga, Angwin/Deer Park, and Lake County, as well as a small park-and-ride. Rental bicycles and battery-powered slow-speed carts for older people and those with disabilities could be offered at key stations.

Each station would follow a standardized template tied to the train design (more on that later) with level, barrier-free boarding—no stairs. Platforms would be 24 inches high—about 600 mm, a European standard that keeps capital costs down—and be about 350 feet long to fit two 2-car units. Where they are built and what they offer—amenities like walkways, lights, landscaping, or security—depends on the area and local activities.

Some stations would connect with shuttle buses, micro-transit options, and ridesharing services. This proposal budgets \$2 million per station, giving room for tweaks without overcomplicating things. Simple is best—overly elaborate designs would increase costs now and in the future.

The Vallejo Ferry Terminal would be the central hub, as half of Napa Valley’s

visitors start out in San Francisco, both West Bay locals and out-of-towners alike. There will be some passengers from Vallejo, the East Bay, and beyond: Soltrans buses from El Cerrito Del Norte and North Concord BART will tie the system into the Bay Area transit network. The Napa County Airport station would intercept visitors from northern Solano and the Sacramento region with a large park-and-ride. The two Downtown Napa stops would welcome overnight guests arriving by car, who can then “park once” at their hotels and enjoy the Napa Valley.

The “Go To” Trainset Design

The go-to train design is the “RS Zero” from Stadler Rail in Switzerland, unveiled at the big Innotrans show in Berlin in September 2025 (see it at www.stadlerrail.com/en/solutions/rolling-stock/mainline-rs-zero). It comes in one- or two-car versions that can run under overhead wires, on batteries, or with hydrogen. At 167 feet long, the two-car setup would work well, allowing two trainsets coupled together to occupy the 350-foot platforms. The design is very flexible and can fit the mix of locals, backpackers, and First-Class tourists we expect between Vallejo and the Napa Valley.

Stadler says a basic two-car RS Zero
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Rail-NVLink: Helping Preserve The Napa Valley

holds 150 seats with a restroom. That should be trimmed to 130–140 to make room for more bikes, as many visitors are likely to rent bikes for a one-way 18-mile ride—say, St. Helena to Napa—but not the full 36-mile loop.

First-Class cars would be plush, with about 100 seats, allowing for extra space, plus a lunch counter, wine tasting nook, and mini wine lessons. That justifies higher fares—still way below the Wine Train's \$250–\$800 range, which targets the top 5%-10% of visitors. During peak tourist hours, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., these cars could offer 200 seats per hour each way—1,200 total over six hours. The proposal is to buy six cars equipped with standard seating, and six cars with First-Class seating, plus two extra cars of each type for backup/maintenance.

For busy summer peaks, five additional single-car trains would boost capacity by making longer trains possible. In quiet times the single-car trains would be swapped for the larger regular trains. The schedule could be scaled back to hourly runs in the off-season and evenings with just three cars. The whole fleet—eight two-unit trains and five singles—should run \$150–200 million, in line with Stadler's U.S. sales prices.

Rail Maintenance Facilities

The Wine Train's maintenance hub on Soscol Avenue in central Napa could grow, but the Wine Train's owners want to convert that site into housing. Selling that land could bankroll new facilities at a new location, such as the Napa County Airport.

Resident and Local Job Holders Ridership Potential

The 2003 Napa/Solano Passenger/Freight Rail Study by R.L. Banks & Associates and LTK Engineering predicted that trains between Vallejo and Napa could attract 585,000 riders per year by 2020—about 2,300 each weekday, based on 255 weekdays. That study assumed four round trips each morning and afternoon, with no midday, evening, or weekend services.

They also crunched numbers to see what happens with more frequent trains. An increase in service to every 15 minutes during peak hours pushed ridership to 1.32 million a year—5,200 a day. This quadrupling of service resulted in a 163% jump in their projections. TRAC's proposal, which doubles projected service to every 30 minutes, should conservatively result in a 42% boost, taking weekday peak period ridership from 2,300 to about 3,450 riders, including north to St. Helena (not included in 2003 study).

Adding 30-minute all-day service, including evenings, and weekends could double estimated peak period ridership to 7,000–7,500 per weekday. Most transit planners multiply weekdays by 290–300 for a yearly total, but 330 was used here to cover the

higher than average potential weekend and holiday ridership.

This results in an estimated 2.5 million annual riders that would use the entire route from the Vallejo Ferry Terminal to St. Helena, not counting tourists (discussed next). Two unknowns: where residents in Vallejo, American Canyon, and Napa will board, and how many budget travelers will pick First Class over standard.

TRAC's projection is consistent with what SMART sees today, adjusted for people and jobs within a 10–15-minute walk (about 0.5 mile) of its stations. SMART has about 70,000 residents and jobs within this walking distance; Between Vallejo and St. Helena are double that or more. The 3,450 daily riders estimated for morning and evening weekday peak hours are nearly twice SMART's current peak numbers.

Unlike SMART, where downtown Santa Rosa or Petaluma are outside easy walking distance from stations, the Napa Valley route would directly serve locations such as downtown Napa, Yountville, and St. Helena. The stations would be very close to where people want to be, making this proposal an optimal example of transit implementation. The 2003 study's estimates may even be conservative!

Tourist Rail Ridership Potential

The 2024 [Vallejo Passenger Rail Study \(VPRS\)](#) took a cursory look at guessing how many San Francisco tourists might take the ferry to Vallejo and then a train to Napa Valley. This proposal's estimates are partially based on Visit Napa Valley's (VSV) 2024 numbers (see [www.visitnapavalley.com](#)). But the VPRS memo didn't consider the potential of ferries after 6 p.m., late runs on weekends or peaks, 11 p.m. bus links to BART, or extra Soltrans bus trips to San Francisco when ferries aren't economic. With the adjustments described in the full version of this paper posted on [Calrailnews.org](#), TRAC projects that NVLink would serve up to 350,000 yearly tourist riders, or 700,000 one-way trips, plus up to 3 million shuttle trips within the Valley.

Napa Valley App, Revenue and Operating Expenses

NVLink's secret weapon? A Napa Valley app for iPhone, Android, Windows, and Mac, backed by a website. It would be a one-stop shop: buy train tickets, book First-Class, lock in wine tastings, hotel rooms, dinners, bike rentals, balloon rides, spa days, or wine-and-food classes—all in a few taps. The obvious sponsor for such an app would be the Napa Valley Tourism Corporation (NVTC) and the Napa Valley Tourism Improvement District (NVTID). They're experienced at tourism and cooperate closely with local businesses and the community—perfect for chasing federal and state grants. Another 1–2% hotel tax increase could

fund these efforts, if voters and businesses approve.

The Napa Valley Transportation Authority (NVTa) should provide oversight, leaving day-to-day operations to the private sector. They could contract with the Napa Valley Wine Train or buy out Noble House Hotels & Resorts' rail assets and co-venture with a private sector rail operator. To connect with Solano County's Suisun City station, NVTID and Vallejo could purchase the Union Pacific Vallejo Branch and in turn lease it to the private sector.

Examining Napa Valley Transit's current fares and Seamless Bay Area's zonal fare ideas (check [www.seamless-bayarea.org/integrated-fare-vision](#)), the 2.5 million annual regular riders could bring in \$7-\$8 million yearly. New hotel taxes or bridge tolls could match this, allowing a shift of some local sales tax revenues from NVT Routes 10 and 11 to upgraded service to Calistoga and Angwin/Deer Park, plus expanding 30-minute local buses within Napa designed to sync with NVLink trains.

First-Class passes could go for \$60–70 a day, or \$100–125 for two or three days, netting \$25–30 million from tourists—somewhat less if some pick standard seats. This would be cheaper than many bus tours, so the service should be an easy sell. Total revenue? \$40–45 million per year is realistic, not counting extras like meals, wine classes, or NVLink “swag.”

Trains should cost \$35-\$40 per mile to operate, costing \$25–29 million per year, not including shuttles, food service, and other amenities. This amount is likely to cover rolling stock leases—or perhaps grants could be used to buy the trains outright. Beyond Napa Valley Transit and Vallejo-San Francisco Ferry tie-ins, NVLink would partner with charter buses, limos, taxis, and rideshares like Lyft and Uber. These costs are consistent with the \$25-\$30 per train mile experience for BART's e-BART service in Eastern Contra Costa County, which operates trains comparable to NVLink's proposal..

Conclusion

The NVLink proposal is fiscally feasible and would offer a major step forward in protecting Napa County from the impacts of ever-increasing tourism. County residents and tourists alike would benefit from its implementation.

About the Authors: Michael D. Setty has nearly 50 years in public transit planning, including a key role in the development and implementation of the Vallejo-San Francisco Ferry. He is also the current President of TRAC and the Editor of California Rail News. Lance Burris has nearly forty years of experience in land development, including the acquisition, planning, and development of large-scale land development projects.

21st Century Passenger Rail Advocacy



The “Los Banos Express” was chosen in CAHSRA’s original business plan instead of Dumbarton-Altamont that still has far higher ridership poitential.

By David Schonbrunn
TRAC Vice President

TRAC members have most likely noticed that there hasn’t been a new *California Rail News* in two years. Frankly, that’s because there hasn’t been a lot of rail news lately that we thought worth reporting on. Similar to our sister organization, RailPAC, we’ve found these have been tough times for rail advocacy. (See sidebar.) Advocates just don’t have the horsepower (i.e., the ability to contribute to politicians) to get politicians’ attention.

The Fundamental Problem in Transportation

My many years of advocacy have shown me that there is rarely a rational connection between the transportation project decisions made by political bodies and the day-to-day transportation needs of the public. I figure that politicians must view the power to decide on transportation priorities as amongst the most important perks of their job. They gain name recognition, prestige, favorability and most importantly, the ability to benefit specific contributors with public gifts such as roads (and a tunnel to get to the Opera!).

San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzalez grandstanded by promising to bring BART to his city. He grabbed the spotlight by shutting down the Interim Commuter Rail project that had been approved and funded, and for which equipment had been ordered. (Had the Mayor not been such a “leader,” the interim project would have been operating for over two decades, helping to reduce the highway congestion going into San Jose.) The second half of the BART project has an estimated cost of \$12 billion, and won’t be completed for another decade, if ever.

The CA HSR project got off to a bad start by violating the prime directive of HSR: connect two points with a

straight line: political influences led to the adoption of a route with detours. TRAC confirmed that prominent Democrats bought up land in Los Banos, with dreams of creating a suburb of San Francisco there. (See map above). This was the major unstated reason for favoring the Pacheco Pass route over the Altamont Pass route, which outperformed it. There were persistent rumors of politicians owning land in the Palmdale area, explaining that detour. Bringing the line through the Central Valley cities along Highway 99 instead of I-5 meant that the resulting slow speed running and the detours would prevent HSR from ever being competitive with air travel. That eliminated the reason to build HSR, and certainly prevented any businesses from wanting to invest in it.

The 2012 California Senate debate on SB 1029, the \$8 Billion HSR Appropriation Bill, was another policy disaster. Impassioned speeches by Committee Chairs Senators DeSaulnier, Lowenthal and Simitian urged No votes, based on all they had learned through extensive committee hearings. The Senate leader allowed them to vote no, but exercised party discipline to get just enough other Democrats to pass the bill. Bad things happen when politics overrules well-reasoned positions: the Chairs had pointed out that starting the HSR project in the Central Valley would lead to a dead-end system, unconnected to the rest of the State. Their foresight was exactly on target, seeing as it appears no further federal funds will be forthcoming. (See page 3.)

Additional Factors

Rail advocacy has a strong generational component. For reasons we haven’t been able to identify, the younger generations are more interested in issues like housing. TRAC’s membership is slowly going down.

Rail advocates are constantly out-organized by bike activists, largely

Steel Wheels, 2011-2025 RIP

TRAC greets with sadness the announcement that the First Quarter 2025 issue would be the last print edition of *Steel Wheels*, the glossy publication of RailPAC, our sister rail advocacy organization. Printing costs were getting too high, and no one could be found to take over the role of Editor.

“*Steel Wheels* was foreseen as a member recruiting tool and as a call to participatory advocacy. Neither of those goals has been achieved. Moving forward RailPAC will shift to on-line which is the predominant source of information for Millennials and Gen Z. ... RailPAC need to be an organization of politically active members.”

TRAC echoes the remarks of Paul Dyson, *Steel Wheel’s* editor and RailPAC President Emeritus: “Now does this mean there is no place for passenger rail advocacy? Absolutely not. I have carried this torch, not for what it is today but for what it could be and should be.”

because recreational activities are easy to promote. We have focused on the foundational infrastructure of society, while they’ve been focused on fun.

There’s a definite anti-rail sentiment afoot, reflected in the Legislature’s uninformed decision to convert the Northwestern Pacific into a trail. Monterey County’s eagerness to build a busway may have been motivated by a desire to prevent rail. Numerous NIMBY groups have opposed rail projects such as Santa Cruz’s, apparently out of an uninformed fear of train noise (modern trains are very quiet and non-polluting).

Advocacy isn’t what it used to be.

Bridges Too Far in Santa Cruz? Absurd Cost Estimates Hobble Rail

By Michael D. Setty
TRAC President & CRN Editor

At a recent public meeting, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (SCCRTC) revealed cost estimates developed by SCCRTC’s consultants for replacing all but a handful of rail bridges on the Santa Cruz Branch Line. These estimates totaled \$980 million for a total of 3,700 feet of rail bridges on the line, or nearly \$270,000 per foot for single track bridges. This estimate comes in at 5–10 times higher than the rail industry norm for bridges—even for potentially complex structures such as replacing the trestle over Aptos Creek in Capitola.

A local rail advocate contrasted the SCCRTC consultant estimate with the replacement costs of 755-foot double-track Santa Margarita bridge in San Diego County that was completed in 2013. That project cost was \$40.7 million, or \$27,000 per single track foot. Even if this cost doubled with inflation, the project cost

would be \$50,000-\$60,000 per single track foot. The SCCRTC consultant estimates are still about five times higher, given that the Santa Margarita bridge was complex.

The consultant estimates also contrasted wildly with the \$3.6 million cost of replacing the approximately 400-foot lomg La Selva Beach rail trestle in 2010. At that time, this project was about \$9,000 per single track foot for a relatively complex structure that replaced the decking, piers, abutments, foundations, and supporting works. Allowing for 2010–2025 inflation, the La Selva Beach trestle would cost around \$8.0-\$9.0 million, or \$20,000–\$25,000 per single track foot.

Local rail advocates and TRAC speculate about the motives for presenting such inflated cost estimates. The most charitable theory is that the local transportation bureaucrats want to give the public “billion-dollar sticker shock,” so when lower, more reasonable cost estimates are released later, the bureaucrats will come

out looking relatively good because the Santa Cruz public would have gotten used to billion dollar+ costs by then.

The second explanation—really a conspiracy theory—is that rail opponents incensed over their decisive 2022 electoral defeat have infiltrated the planning process and put out absurd cost estimates in order to kill rail in Santa Cruz County once and for all. The least charitable theory is that the consultants and/or SCCRTC staff—or both—are simply incompetent.

No matter which explanation proves correct, this is not a hopeful moment in the implementation of rail transit in Santa Cruz County. Back in 2022, TRAC had urged the SCCRTC to seek a private rail operator willing to invest in the line. (See *California Rail News*, April/September 2022.) That could have led to startup of a dinner and excursion trains, and eventually transit service. The SCCRTC chose instead to commence interminable studies such as the current one underway.

TRAC Suggests Defunding Rail & Transit Boondoggles

By David Schonbrunn
TRAC Vice President

TRAC recently sent a letter to Congressman Kevin Kiley strongly supporting his proposed bill that would make California High-Speed Rail ineligible for future funding. While strong advocates for High-Speed Rail properly done, TRAC has opposed this specific project from its beginning.

CHSRA has stubbornly avoided private sector participation, thereby guaranteeing it will fail as a business. We see it as a boondoggle unlikely to ever serve the public. Because California has planned all its rail projects to connect to HSR, California will not be able to intelligently develop worthwhile projects until this one is killed.

TRAC suggested the federal government claw back the 2023 CRISI grant of \$202 million, the 2023 \$3.074 billion Federal-State Partnership grant, as well as the FY10 \$960 million grant that had been withdrawn by the Trump Administration and restored

by the Biden Administration.

TRAC has always focused on cost-effectiveness in improving passenger rail service. California, unfortunately, has chosen to maximize political effectiveness over cost-effectiveness, as is so evident in the HSR debacle. In its letter to Rep. Kiley, TRAC stressed that the benefits of the following projects are primarily political and do not deserve federal funding:

- * The Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority’s BART to San Jose extension is a crazily mismanaged project that is way over budget, and long ago stopped being cost-effective. Other transit routes into San Jose exist and are being made faster. TRAC suggests its 2024 \$5.1 billion grant be clawed back.
- * The BART-Capitol Corridor “Link 21” Program, which would add a second rail tunnel under San Francisco Bay, connecting Oakland to San Francisco. We believe the actual demand for this facility is

decades away.

- * The multi-billion dollar Valley Link project would connect the Dublin-Pleasanton BART station in Alameda County to Mountain House in San Joaquin County. This project is hugely wasteful, because it would move a freeway rather than connect to the BART station using a former rail line.
- * Monterey-Salinas Transit received a \$92 million FTA grant for its Surf Busway (see Page 8). The construction of this busway would do little to relieve congestion on the parallel Highway 1, but it would require ripping out tracks of the Monterey Branch Line. That rail line could be put back into service at a modest cost. We think this is very bad decision making.

TRAC is attempting to connect with DOGE, to assist it in rooting out fraud and abuse. See breaking news on Page 3.

Continued from Page 3

its politically driven route.

Who Does the CHSRA Serve?

The SNCF’s commonsense proposal would have reduced the risk to the State of California by bringing in private funding that would have been committed to making the project actually operate. (As of 2025, there is still no track laid or service provided. after spending upwards of \$8 billion. This is unheard of in the international rail industry.)

The SNCF proposal would have brought in the expertise needed for

critical design decisions, along with private capital willing to assume ridership risk.

When the history of California’s HSR project is told, its failure will be seen to have been caused by the Authority itself, not its opponents. By rejecting the SNCF proposal, keeping it secret, and then mounting an all-hands-on-deck damage control effort to snuff out the story when it finally became public, CHSRA clearly told the world that its commitment was to its army of consultants, not to delivering an HSR project to the people of California.

For the last 30 years, David Schonbrunn has been President of TRANSDEF.org, a non-profit environmental organization advocating for better transit. TRANSDEF is currently challenging the Valley Link rail project.

As part of a coalition of cities, counties, individuals and environmental organizations, TRANSDEF sued CHSRA, challenging its EIR in 2008. The litigation with CHSRA lasted until 2022, when the California Supreme Court declined to review the last appellate ruling. After also serving as President of the Train Riders Association of California, he is now Vice-President.

Losing a Key Rail Line for a Half-Baked Busway Plan?

MONTEREY BRANCH LINE LIGHT RAIL

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The 16-mile corridor extends between Monterey and Castroville on the publicly owned tracks adjacent to Highway 1.

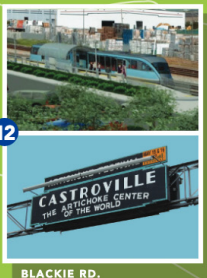
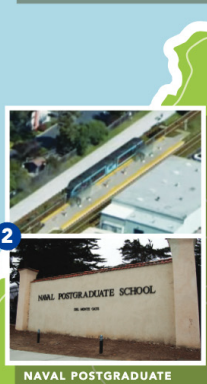
The first phase of the project will run between Monterey and north Marina with key stations in Monterey, Seaside, Sand City, Marina/CSUMB, and connecting bus service to Pacific Grove and Carmel to the south and Salinas to the east. Later phases will extend service to the planned commuter rail station in Castroville and increase the frequency of trains.

This project is currently in the environmental review process.

Project Benefits

- Improves access between Peninsula Cities
- Connects to trains to San Francisco and San Jose
- Better for the environment
- Reduces oil consumption
- Reduces greenhouse gas emissions
- Provides alternative to traffic congestion
- Promotes economic development around stations
- Less expensive than widening highways
- Facilitates access to jobs, health care, shopping
- Reduces commuter stress

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The Monterey Peninsula had a sensible rail plan back in 2010, but abandoned it in favor of a dubious busway scheme just when much more rail funding became available from the Biden Administration. Trump Administration funding for the busway is uncertain.

**By David Schonbrunn
Vice President, TRAC**

California is poised to lose another historic rail line: After the Legislature voted to convert the Northwestern Pacific Railroad (Arcata/Eureka to Cloverdale) into a trail, bureaucrats have decided to turn the Monterey Branch Line into a busway. The Transportation Authority of Monterey County (TAMC) has done little to bring the Line into operation since receiving a Proposition 116 grant to purchase it back in 2003. After completing a study that (intentionally?) proved they couldn't afford to turn it into a light rail project, the Line has just sat. The local bus district, Monterey Salinas Transit (MST), proposed putting a busway in the right-of-way, to enable their buses to bypass traffic congestion on adjacent Highway 1. The benefits of this were always dubious in TRAC's view.

The Branch Line is near the ocean, placing it in the jurisdiction of the California Coastal Commission (CCC). When MST presented its proposed project to the CCC, staff there opined that the project could not legally be approved, because it was in an area of environmentally endangered dunes. MST nonetheless persevered with the project for another 5 years, consistently being told by the CCC that the project could not be approved. Finally, with grants in hand that had approaching deadlines, MST made a formal proposal to the CCC, whose rejection was proposed by a thoroughly documented 68-page staff report. The vote was postponed while the State

Senator for the area convened a group of decisionmakers to get them to come up with a solution. Under great political pressure, the CCC agreed to revise its staff report, reversing the major conclusions 180° so the project could be approved. The busway would be placed where the existing rails are today, so as to minimize environmental damage.

What stands out about this project is the way that every political institution was pressed into supporting this project, despite it being ill-conceived and unlikely to work. It seemed like there was some ulterior motive driving this project, but we never found the smoking gun. Every local politician testified to the CCC in glowing terms as to the benefits that improved transit would make—claims that were obviously insincere, since these people don't use transit. CCC then approved the project with only one Commissioner objecting. TRAC testified against the busway project.

During the latter part of the controversy, TRAC got involved, and proposed a low-cost plan to resume passenger service on the Branch Line, bringing it all the way into downtown Monterey, a major visitor destination. This line would eventually connect with Salinas and the Bay Area. TRAC provided cost estimates demonstrating that visitor traffic could make the line economically viable, not to mention provide a benefit to highway congestion. See: <https://calrailnews.org/trac-proposal-for-low-cost-rail-marina-seaside-instead-of-busway/>.

The story of the Branch Line is not

over, however. The Museum of Handcar Technology, which had been leasing the line to operate handcars (a form of rail bike), publicly opposed the busway. When TAMC refused to renew their lease because of that opposition, the Museum sued. They recently received a preliminary injunction preventing TAMC from evicting them. The gutsy Museum also sued the California Transportation Commission (CTC) for allowing TAMC to escape its legal prohibition against converting the right-of-way into a busway. The CTC voted to allow TAMC to refund the Prop. 116 grant that had contained the prohibition. The Museum seeks to have the Court overturn that CTC decision, thereby killing the busway project.

