Count me in as a high speed rail enthusiast. Who wouldn't want to sit in a train car, sipping an ice-cold ginger ale, while traveling at speeds of up to 220 mph through the Central Valley? As Rick described last month, the potential benefits to our quality- and way-of-life, by encouraging more pedestrian-focused neighborhoods and discouraging automobile travel, could be immense. But the current high speed rail plans may create some serious problems for the state.

The first big issue is the impact of high speed rail on land use, particularly in the Northern California segment. In order to bring the line from San Francisco to San Jose, a major regional city, the train would have to continue south through the Pacheco Pass, with possible stations near environmentally-sensitive and lightly-populated areas. By contrast, a more direct route from San Francisco out of the Bay Area would travel through the Altamont Pass northeast of San Jose. This route would serve the more densely-populated corridors in the Livermore-Pleasanton area, as well as towns along I-5 to the south. But it would essentially miss San Jose. This map from Transdef illustrates the issue:

So far, the Pacheco Pass route seems to have won the day, although the California High Speed Rail Authority suffered a legal setback last fall when a state superior court ruled that the environmental review on the Pacheco alignment was deficient. Some environmental groups are worried that the Pacheco alignment will spur sprawl development along the route in the rural valleys to the south of the Bay. After all, it would be a fast commute to Silicon Valley and San Francisco from suburban homes many miles away to the south. Although creating sprawl is probably not what many high-speed rail enthusiasts have in mind, without sensible land use policies, that may be the result.

The second big issue is the funding. As Rick noted, the Obama Administration awarded California $2.9 billion in federal stimulus funds. But this award was less than the $4.7 billion the Authority had hoped to receive. In total, the state is hoping the federal government ponies up $17 to $19 billion, out of a projected total budget of $45 billion. Not to be a negative Nancy here, but rail programs in California traditionally end up costing much more than the initial projections indicate, while ridership is often far less than hoped for. In this case, high speed rail boosters predict 41 million riders by 2035, at a ticket cost that would be 83% percent of typical airfare over the same distance. If those numbers are off by even a marginal amount, Southwest Airlines could look better and better to get between north and south, and the state could be looking at a big financial black hole.

California's leaders can head off these problems. To remedy the sprawl danger, the state should encourage smart land use planning along the high speed rail route. Such a state land use plan is overdue anyway, but priority should go to maximizing compact development around stations and preserving open space away from them. As for the financing picture, the state and federal government simply need to begin prioritizing mass transit over highways, and high-speed rail should be a beneficiary of this support. I’ve blogged about this before, but highway support should not dwarf funding for public transit. And to save construction costs, public managers of the project will have to ensure that contractors get the job done quickly and on-time.

I’m looking forward to that 220 mph ginger ale on my way to Union Station, but I hope in the meantime that California’s leaders get serious about land use planning and funding for mass transit over highways.