



High speed rail will ease this commute

The saga of high speed rail in California continues. Since state voters approved a bond measure in 2008 to authorize construction of a system linking north and south, the [California High Speed Rail Authority](#) has faced lawsuits over its unfortunate planned route away from the population centers of the northern Central Valley, opposition from wealthy suburbanites south of San Francisco to the portion that would link the city to San Jose, and a [huge funding shortfall](#) to build the system that was originally envisioned.

Perhaps this explains why the rail authority [today officially approved](#) the first segment of high speed rail from Madera to Corcoran in the Central Valley, with a station in Fresno. Actually, the line begins somewhere near Madera, but not *in* Madera (sorry, Maderans). So for the ~~millions~~ thousands of commuters fighting traffic from Hanford to Madera, you can breathe a sigh of relief that \$4.15 billion worth of help is coming your way.

Why this segment? The unfortunate answer is that the system doesn't have the money it needs to be built, and the Rail Authority now must act quickly to use [existing federal dollars before they expire](#). This largely pointless section of high speed rail can be built quickly because nobody lives there to complain and the route doesn't have the construction hassles associated with building in an urbanized area. I'm also told it's a good place to start testing some of the equipment for the rest of the line.

What should have happened? Ideally, the first segment would link densely populated employment and housing centers. My choice would have been an Anaheim to downtown Los Angeles route. The Authority could build that segment, have some of the 13 million people living nearby actually use it and like it, and then hope that those riders would clamor to have the rail line extended to other places they want to go, like Bakersfield, Sacramento, and San Francisco. You would have a built-in political constituency to support future efforts toward expansion.

I understand this more logical segment in Southern California (and a similar segment from San Francisco to San Jose in the north) is too expensive and time-consuming to build first. But the danger now is that the “starter section” serves no one and becomes a \$4 billion boondoggle. Los Angeles tried the starter line approach with its subway when faced with similar funding problems and community opposition. But at least the first four miles of the Los Angeles subway served downtown Los Angeles and Union Station, and not Pacoima to Chatsworth. Two decades later, the 18 mile subway is finally poised to expand to critical population centers to the west, and the viability of the first segment created the political demand for expansion.

My concern is that, in a rush to get funding and construction started, the High Speed Rail Authority may have created a long-term political disaster that could prove fatal to the system. Perhaps the safer bet would have been to raise funds and support for a more viable first segment, even if it damaged the overall financial picture for the rest of the system. With a successful first segment, you could undertake the long-term fight necessary to expand the system statewide. This fight is coming anyway, because the private sector and state and federal government simply don't have the resources to build what Californians want right away. But with this decision, it looks like high speed rail is in danger of coming off the tracks.