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California Governor Jerry Brown has [doubled down](#) on his support for the state's proposed high speed rail system, despite the uncertainty about how to pay for it and growing public opposition. But who can blame him? If the rail system does get built, it will be the defining infrastructure project in the state for generations to come — a major legacy for any political leader. Transportation experts can complain all they want about the high costs and cheaper alternatives, but once rail lines like this one get built, they tend to become an integral and even beloved part of the physical and political landscape, no matter how much they drain the budget.

But if the system does get built as planned, what impact will it have on California's development patterns? Will it lead to sprawl around the new stations? Certainly some real estate developers are salivating at the prospect of building master-planned suburbs in these areas. The cheap housing and quick commute on the bullet train will open otherwise rural and agricultural areas for development, particularly in the section of the proposed route between San Jose to Gilroy. To be sure, this sprawl-inducing effect may be tempered somewhat by the likely high cost of commuting regularly by bullet train, and [experience in Europe](#) suggests that bullet trains don't always lead to significant sprawl. But state leaders should take this concern seriously and act now to curtail the risk of "high-speed sprawl" — a consequence that flies in the face of both the environmental arguments advanced to support the system and the state's climate change and land use goals under AB 32 and SB 375.

The state can take at least three steps to minimize the risk:

1. Condition any dollars spent on rail stations on the local land use authorities developing station area plans that concentrate development within walking, biking, and transit distance of the station. These plans may need to involve urban growth boundaries. This policy could be modeled on the San Francisco Bay Area Metropolitan Transportation Commission's "[Resolution 3434](#)," which introduces this local planning requirement for municipalities wishing to receive MTC money for a new transition station.
2. Dedicate funds to help local governments pay for this planning. Yes, the system will be expensive and the funds aren't all there even for the train at this point, but the land use component needs to be prioritized.
3. Most challenging of all, retool the proposed route of the system to serve areas

less likely to sprawl. While redoing parts of the route may require new environmental analysis, it doesn't have to jeopardize the initial segment that proponents want to get started immediately to take advantage of sunseting federal funds. Some environmental and smart growth advocates have proposed an alternative route (map after the jump) which would avoid the environmentally sensitive areas south of San Jose, the agriculturally important (and politically opposed to rail) areas in the southern San Joaquin Valley, and the sprawl-ripened high desert by Palmdale. The High Speed Rail Authority should give it serious consideration.

These are not easy steps given the current political and economic environment. But if Governor Brown really wants to leave a legacy for future generations, he should ensure that high speed rail does not exacerbate the sprawl, traffic, and environmental degradation that led made many voters to support the system in the first place.



Blue is the current proposed route, purple is the environmentally friendly alternative