

Experts Look Into California Rail Future, See Challenges That Might Derail Progress

COMMITTEE REPORT



The Future of Rail in Southern California Luncheon Panelists, Photos © John Livzey, 2015

Our June 2 luncheon entitled “The Future of Rail in Southern California” brought together rail experts from across Southern California to discuss the future of rail in a county with a population greater than many states.

Project Manager Pattie Antich of Platinum Sponsor firm Stantec introduced the moderator, Chief Operating Officer Samantha Bricker of Exposition Construction Authority (photo right), and panel. The four-person panel comprised Michelle Boehm, Southern California Regional Director of the California High-Speed Rail Authority (Authority); Art Leahy, Chief Executive Officer of Metrolink; Jeanet Owens, Executive Officer of Program Management, Metro; and Don Sepulveda, Executive Officer of Regional Rail, Metro.



New Project Updates

Opening the program, chapter president Amanda Smith Heinke offered an overview of Los Angeles County rail lines, noting the extension of the Gold Line to Azusa, followed closely by completion of the Expo Line from Culver City to downtown Santa Monica.

Boehm offered an overview of the high-speed rail project and the plan to construct an over 800-mile, high-speed, electrified rail system in California. She noted that construction has begun in the Central Valley with workers now building the project’s first 30 miles of infrastructure. The project’s Southern California office oversees 330 miles of the project between Bakersfield and San Diego.

Metrolink to Address Reliability, Metro to Focus on Rail System Investment

Leahy reported that Metrolink has been doing well in terms of fare box revenue recovery, especially in comparison to other train lines and the Los Angeles County Metro systems. He mentioned that he will



progress with community input without delaying the project, Owens (Left) said that transparency with stakeholders remains a key requirement for project success.

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Rail Projects Demand Wide Coordination

Leahy seized on the coming high-speed rail project as an example of why coordination with stakeholders is essential when planning rail projects. When high-speed rail comes to Southern California, Leahy explained, different rail operators must understand their roles in the community.

"Some Metrolink and Amtrak service will parallel high-speed rail," he said. "What will become of these services?"

Sepulveda (Right) agreed that partnership among service providers remains critical, noting that Metro partners with cities and other transit agencies to provide the best service to customers. As an example of this, he mentioned that Metro funds 50 percent of Metrolink's operations.

What Will Entice More People To Ride Rail?

Bricker asked her panel what could be done to entice more people to ride rail, particularly as ridership has been declining in Southern California in recent years.

Leahy, noting that many of Metrolink's riders are discretionary riders, emphasized that system maintenance is very important.



What Are Barriers to More Riders?

"If service is lousy, riders will simply choose another mode of transportation," Leahy said. He cited outdated locomotives with improper service causing delays, one flaw that discourages riders. He added that malfunctioning ticket vending machines also frustrate riders. To reduce rider frustration, he believes that transit services should be better coordinated.

“Work must be done to connect all these transit systems: The first mile, last mile issue needs to be addressed,” Boehm said. “Barriers that prevent ridership—such as poor customer service—must be faced. The services also must be reliable and on time.”



Parking Valued More Than Transit

“We need to reverse the current trend that encourages driving,” said Sepulveda. “Right now, the federal subsidy for parking is more than the subsidy for public transportation. Parking is basically valued more than transit, and this needs to change to encourage ridership.”

Public-Private Partnerships Must Generate Value

Next, Bricker asked the panelists what public-private partnerships (PPPs) they saw in their agencies’ future.

“The public sector must ensure that investment in rail will actually generate value,” she explained. “It’s important for the private sector to realize that a PPP is not ‘charity.’ ”

Boehm (Right) stated that not only did she favor PPP, they are a critical piece of the Authority’s Business Plan.



“As a public agency, the Authority must make a concerted effort to articulate the positive impact of our project,” she said. “There is more value in high-speed rail than just ticket revenue.”

“Metro will need more state and local funding because the federal government is not providing as much as they did in the past,” Owens said. “Metro is considering PPP as a way to fill the funding gap.” She mentioned that there is state legislation concerning PPP for highways and tollways and that Metro is looking at options for non-highway funding for PPP as well.

Projects Must Be Popular to Win Funding

Projects must have impact, and they must be popular among the public in order to achieve funding,” Leahy added. “For example, Los Angeles voters must pass an increase in sales tax that funds transit projects.” He also mentioned that geographical politics play into funding transit projects.

“The Future of Rail in Southern California” luncheon was held at the Millennium Biltmore Hotel’s Emerald Room in downtown Los Angeles. Kaoru McCullough of Michael Baker International chaired the program.

Our thanks to the University of Southern California students who contributed to this piece: Thomas Check, Cassandra Gogreve, Caitlin Shankle, Sheng'ao Xie, Yuzhe Ying, and Feiyang Zhang.