

By: Charles F. Bostwick December 20, 2011

Federal spending on California's proposed high-speed rail system should be halted until September while a government report is prepared on the \$99-billion-plus system's viability, an Antelope Valley congressman told a congressional panel Thursday.

Speaking to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Rep. Kevin McCarthy - through whose district the 220-mph train is due to run - pointed out that the projected cost has more than doubled from 2008, and he also questioned proponents' projections for how many people would ride the system and how much nongovernmental investment it will attract.

"I believe when you look at this project from the beginning, when you hold it to account now, it is fundamentally different," said McCarthy, R-Bakersfield. "And if you do build it, and they do not come, what are we going to give up to subsidize everyone who is on that train?"

McCarthy, whose district includes Tehachapi, east Kern County and part of Lancaster, told the panel about Tuesday's announcement by famed aviation designer Burt Rutan and billionaire Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen of a space-launch company that will build the world's biggest airplane in Mojave.

"They didn't ask for government money; they did it on their own."

McCarthy and the Valley's other congressman, Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon, R-Santa Clarita, through whose district the trains also would run, in October proposed freezing federal spending for a year while the Government Accountability Office studies ridership projections, future costs and subsidies, ticket prices and other issues.

"That's not extreme, that's not taking it and saying no," McCarthy said Thursday, adding that Congress has a duty to scrutinize projects on which it spends money.

California High-Speed Rail Authority officials disclosed in a report last month that the estimated cost of building the system has risen to at least \$99 billion and possibly \$118 billion from the \$43 billion estimate in 2009, meaning that the \$9.95 billion bond California voters passed in 2008 would pay less than a tenth of its cost.

Also, the completion date has been delayed from 2020 to 2033.

Two weeks ago, the Legislative Analyst's Office said the \$6 billion first segment will be too short to use, and it would be illegal to spend bond money on it because environmental studies will not be completed and the funding plan doesn't identify where money will come from to build either of two extensions needed to make it usable.

State Sen. Doug LaMalfa, R-Richvale, whose district is north of Sacramento, has authored legislation to freeze high-speed rail funding and announced he plans to introduce a measure next year calling for a new vote by California citizens.

The initial construction segment on which rail officials plan to start work in late 2012 is 130 miles of high-speed track from south of Merced to north of Bakersfield. Funding is proposed to consist of \$3.3 billion from the federal government and \$2.7 billion from the 2008 bond measure.

While rail officials say the 130-mile stretch of track could be used to reduce travel times on the existing Amtrak passenger service through the San Joaquin Valley, it would not operate high-speed trains until another 160 or 170 miles of track is completed: Either north to link Bakersfield and San Jose, or south to link Fresno and the San Fernando Valley, presumably through Mojave, Rosamond, Lancaster, Palmdale and Acton, though possibly down Interstate 5.

Meanwhile, Democratic lawmakers and the Obama administration reiterated their support for the high-speed rail system, saying California's transportation network is overwhelmed and alternatives are needed to keep the state economically competitive, the Associated Press reported. They noted that China is undergoing a construction boom in high-speed rail.

Rep. Jim Costa, a Democrat from Fresno, said with low interest rates and inflation, now is the perfect time to invest heavily in the high-speed rail line. He also said major infrastructure projects of the past, such as the transcontinental railroad, Hoover Dam and the interstate highway system, would never have been completed if past leaders had been so pessimistic, AP reported.

"It's never an easy thing to invest in the beginning," added Rep. Loretta Sanchez, a Democrat from Orange County, according to the AP report. "We must have the courage to say we need high-speed rail and that it makes sense for the backbone of California to have that in place and that it will cost money."