

18 January 2024

# Governance Reform for Southern California Rail

by Streets For All, Rail Passengers Association of California, and Californians for Electric Rail



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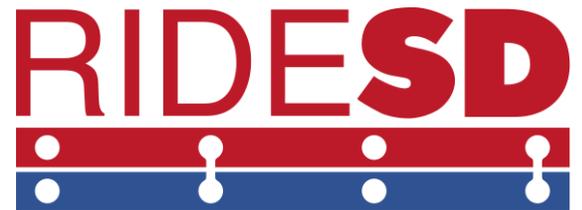
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## **The Need for Reform:**

Southern California passenger rail is in trouble. Climate change threatens the Amtrak Surfliner, whose coastal tracks in Del Mar and San Clemente are nearly falling into the ocean, causing months-long service cancellations. Metrolink and Coaster commuter services are seeing low ridership recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic because their schedules do not accommodate convenient travel outside a 9-to-5 workday. Stations lack local transit connections, fares are not well integrated, and trains are often delayed due to equipment issues and freight train traffic; all this making service difficult to access, and unreliable.

However, there is an opportunity for Southern California to have one of the best passenger rail networks in the country if adequate investments are made to run trains frequently and reliably all day. The Los Angeles to San Diego corridor has some of the strongest market potential for intercity rail in the United States. Reducing travel times between those cities could make trains the premiere travel option (and reduce freeway traffic) and expanded service north of Los Angeles could improve connectivity with Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo.

To further realize this potential, existing commuter rail run by Metrolink and North County Transit District (NCTD) must become frequent “regional” rail and connect seamlessly to intercity services like the Surfliner, with trains coming at least every 15 minutes. Slow and polluting diesel locomotives should be replaced with electric trains powered by overhead catenary wires, a proven solution for achieving zero-emissions operation, unlike other proposed methods.

There are dozens of proposed projects in the works that could reduce travel times, save trackage from erosion, and improve reliability. However, responsible agencies have been slow to deliver. Partially, this is due to a lack of an overarching regional vision but in many cases, it is because of fractured infrastructure ownership between several county agencies. In some cases, high-profile rapid transit projects or freeway expansion projects have been the main focus of these agencies, taking away resources from regional rail. The Link Union Station project, which would provide additional capacity and several minutes of time savings by constructing run-through tracks (think LA’s Regional Connector but for regional rail), has been stalled for years as it is a highly complex project that LA Metro has not prioritized. In other cases, agencies have been hypersensitive to local opposition. Orange County Transportation Authority’s (OCTA) Serra Siding Extension project would allow more frequent trains through a bottleneck near San Clemente and Dana Point, but it has been stalled due to hyperlocal complaints about the project. The same happened to LA Metro’s Raymer to Bernson Double Track project, which would have increased Surfliner and Metrolink service north of Los Angeles by providing much-needed capacity between Chatsworth and Van Nuys.

Clearly, the hyper-local focus of the current governance has been a failure. Counties take care of counties, with little regional focus. Money that flows into counties stays there, and they are

reluctant to fund regional projects, especially if the physical infrastructure is in another county, regardless of the benefits. Going forward, there is little confidence that the current governance can deliver success, especially given the challenges related to the necessity of tunnels in San Clemente and Del Mar.

### **Recommendations – The Organization**

Ideally, there would be one major agency for all intercity and regional rail in Southern California, with control over its own infrastructure, ample funding for frequent operations, and permanent staff focused on improvement projects. The goals of the organization should be to provide the highest quality service and highest ridership regional rail service for the greater Southern California region.

### **Recommendations – The Board**

The Board needs to be independent and operate at arm's length from the political bodies that appoint Board Members to assure a regional perspective and isolation from the hyper-local pressure that stalls projects of regional importance. It is equally important for the board to consist of a mix of those appointed for their history of public service and those with the necessary skills to oversee the activities of the new agency's staff. Board membership should be diverse with political appointees serving alongside those with professional expertise in management, finance, labor relations, transportation, etc. In addition, there should be Board Members representing customers and labor.

### **Recommendations – Funding**

Existing funding sources (local, state, and federal) must continue to flow and ideally should be bolstered to the regional agency. To fulfill the long-term opportunity of the corridor, developing a dedicated region-wide funding stream for ongoing capital projects and operations funding should be a priority. Moreover, this agency should be able to levy taxes and issue bonds for the sake of capital and operational costs.

### **Recommendations – Structure**

The new agency could be a new state agency led by a single county with other counties represented on the state agency's board. Alternatively, it could be a stand-alone Joint Powers Authority with all county assets owned collectively. Another option would be to organize the agency like a terminal railroad with each county owning shares in the railroad. Regardless of specific structure, we caution against marble layer cake governance with too many veto actors whose incentives are often hyper-local rather than regional and in the best interests of rail governance.

### **Recommendations – Management, Operations and Capital Projects**

The new Southern California Regional Rail entity should be organized solely as a railroad, independent of member counties and large enough to support a robust management team responsible for a wide range of management and oversight. Importantly, the new entity needs to develop and invest in an extensive and permanent staff, giving it a high level of expertise for both operations and capital projects reflective of its long-term goals. The management and board would have direct control over its capital budget, project priorities, and construction. The entity could directly operate all or some of its trains or franchise out all or some of its operations. Whatever the preference, it will have some operating agreements with other rail companies including Amtrak, BNSF, Union Pacific, CAHSRA, and freight shortlines.

### **Recommendations – Right-of-Way and Track**

Because of the legal complexities, the reality is that some track and right-of-way is owned by counties and freight railroads. Operating agreements with the freight railroads will continue, however county-owned properties could be held collectively within the new entity. The only exception might be Los Angeles Union Station, which because of its acquisition history and development potential for LA Metro, is very complex. A lease of the assets required for the agency's operations may be an option. This would ensure that the Southern California Regional operator has rights to improve right of way with its capital projects, and increase service levels, without a county veto.

Electrification with overhead catenary, including on mainlines owned by Class I railroads, needs to be championed by regional governments or the new rail authority. Not only will it reduce the harmful effects of diesel pollution on citizens, electrification infrastructure can be shared by both passenger and freight trains. Passenger ridership has proven around the world to greatly increase following electrification, due to increased speed, frequency (in part due to lower operation and maintenance costs), reliability, and passenger comfort from less noise and no smoke.

Different models of ownership (such as publicly-owned electrification infrastructure over tracks that are privately-owned per the LA-Fullerton electrification proposed by California High Speed Rail on the BNSF-owned section of LOSSAN) and capital project financing need to be explored. Reducing the financial/operational risks and upfront costs for freight railroads with publicly-backed financing (grants, loans, bonds, etc.) will expedite much-needed regional rail electrification.

In addition to the benefits of electrification and increased passenger train frequency, new types of freight service (short & medium-haul, light "express" freight), which the Class Is have not pursued in favor of long-haul business, should be advanced in the public interest of reduced less truck traffic on roads.

The substantial amount of public direct investment in freight rail track capacity already (on both public and privately owned track, such as port-area rail projects and adding a third track on the BNSF mainline through Hesperia) has provided substantial public benefits for Southern California.

**Conclusion:**

Governance that can fulfill the opportunity to build a world-class rail service throughout the Southern California region is essential. This high-capacity electrified rail network would offer travel times, frequencies, fares, and connections that would enable the rail service to be an attractive alternative to driving. It would be the greener and more cost-effective alternative to freeway expansions.

With capacity for higher frequencies, services could be offered to more varied market segments – frequent local trains for short-distance trips and economy travel, and limited stop trains for longer distance trips and premium travelers. These could still be branded as separate services like Amtrak and Metrolink, but integrate seamlessly with clock face schedules that enable timed transfers at major hub stations.

By leveraging California’s Integrated Ticketing Project, the agency would offer one-stop information, ticketing and payment portals. The new fare structure would create through fares over multiple connections with no tickets– just tap a credit card or use TAP/PRONTO to board. Like other consumer loyalty programs, customers would be rewarded for the number of trips they take on the network. Travel loyalty discounts for travel between any city pair would replace the steep upfront cost of multiple-ride tickets.

In addition to providing expanded quality rail passenger service, the world class rail line would provide capacity for the expansion of traffic to/from the ports of San Diego and Hueneme as well as northern Mexico with its growing manufacturing activity.

**Appendix**

**List of Critical Capital Projects**

Regardless of governance structure, it is critical that key infrastructure projects are delivered to help improve service by adding capacity and reducing train travel times. The following is a list of critical projects for Southern California regional rail and their associated benefits:

Project	Status	Benefit
<a href="#">Chatsworth (Bernson) to Van Nuys (Raymer) Double Track</a>	Canceled	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allows Metrolink service every 30 minutes between Los Angeles and Chatsworth</li> </ul>

<a href="#">Serra Siding Extension</a>	On Hold	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Allows service every 30 minutes (Amtrak and Metrolink combined) through the San Clemente bottleneck</li> </ul>
<a href="#">Link Union Station</a>	Awaiting pre-construction , funding not secured	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Adds network capacity for additional frequency at LA Union Station, reduces Surfliner travel times</li> <li>● Prepares the station for California High-Speed Rail</li> </ul>
<a href="#">Del Mar Tunnel</a>	Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Protects tracks from coastal erosion</li> <li>● Provides additional double track for improved service frequencies and reliability for Amtrak/Coaster</li> </ul>
<a href="#">San Clemente Tunnel</a>	Not started	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bypasses coastal tracks in San Clemente which are threatened by erosion</li> <li>● Provides additional double track for improved service frequencies and reliability for Amtrak/Metrolink</li> </ul>
<a href="#">Sun Valley (Brighton) to Sylmar (Roxford) Double-Track</a>	Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Allows Metrolink service every 30 minutes between Los Angeles and Santa Clarita</li> </ul>
Fullerton Junction	Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Greatly increases overall train capacity and reliability on LOSSAN and BNSF San Bernardino Subdivision (including Metrolink 91 line to Riverside County), by adding 4th track through Fullerton and 3rd track east from existing Fullerton Junction, and improved crossover movements to minimize train interference.</li> </ul>