

Op-ed: True cost of Redlands Passenger Rail Project

By Jon
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Questions have been raised about the true cost of the Redlands Passenger Rail Project.

To be certain, the estimated cost for the project has changed over time.

Is that because the San Bernardino Associated Governments (SanBAG) is attempting to deceive the public, as is claimed by the rail detractors? Or is it because SanBAG has sought out, listened to and understood the community as it develops a commuter rail service that is cleaner, quieter, more efficient, and cheaper to operate than the more familiar Metrolink service?

SanBAG's budget for the Redlands Passenger Rail Project is \$242 million. Included in the project budget are preliminary engineering and environmental clearance (completed March 2015); final design (contract award summer 2015); construction of the track, structures, and stations (anticipated 2017 start); vehicle procurement (Diesel Multiple Units selected as preferred vehicles March 2015;) right-of-way acquisition; and program management (contract award summer 2015).

Included in the total budget are contingency amounts for the various parts of the project mentioned above. The \$30 million estimated cost for the DMUs is included in the budget mentioned above.

To meet this budget, SanBAG evaluated many design and operational alternatives in the project's environmental documents (EIR/EIS).

However, prior to the start of the environmental document in 2011, SanBAG completed an Alternatives Analysis, reviewing five transit modes, including Light Rail Transit, Bus Rapid Transit, Diesel Multiple Unit, extension of Metrolink service, and a Baseline Alternative that optimized existing transit facilities and services without major capital expenditures.

Based on this analysis, a commuter rail service was determined to be the most feasible and cost-effective in meeting the project goals of improving mobility, travel times and corridor safety; while maintaining freight service, which will continue to be in operation on the western end of the rail line for many years to come.

Light Rail Transit cannot run comingled with freight service. The Baseline Alternative of optimizing existing transit services did not compete well with respect to travel times when compared to commuter rail.

In addition, SanBAG as the owner of the railroad right-of-way is required to maintain freight service on the line, even if no passenger rail service is implemented, which necessitates the need to replace or rehabilitate structures along the rail route at a significant cost.

Not included in the Redlands Passenger Rail Project is the \$103 million cost of the Downtown San Bernardino Passenger Rail Project. It is a separate project with the independent purpose of extending Metrolink train service to the new San Bernardino Transit Center. This Center provides regional connections to Omnitrans bus service, the new sbX Bus Rapid Transit service, and transit service to the mountain and desert areas of San Bernardino County.

While the RPRP will eventually connect to the transit center, it has been analyzed for environmental impacts and funded separately from both of these other projects. Both the San Bernardino Transit Center and the San Bernardino Passenger Rail Project are already under construction; whereas the RPRP is now entering the final design phase.

An additional cost for the RPRP that has been correctly identified by opponents is the cost of borrowing money to complete the RPRP in a timely manner.

That cost is about \$78 million.

This can be viewed similarly to the money we as individuals might borrow to finance the construction or purchase of a home. Very few individuals/families have the funds available to pay cash for their house, and as a result, financing is obtained. SanBAG invokes the same strategy when it comes to paying for freeway and transit projects.

Similar to the homebuyer scenario, if SanBAG were to save up money from Measure I to pay cash for the RPRP, it would take nearly 30 years to acquire that amount of inflation-affected funding.

Furthermore, it would also cost more to construct the project than it does now, even with the cost to finance. In economic terms, the longer you wait, the higher the cost.

Advancing public transportation options is neither a simple or cost-free consideration. SanBAG works to provide choices for people who are looking to move effectively and efficiently within the region.

Building RPRP now addresses the immediate need of current transportation demand while connecting people with access to medical, retail and government services.

RPRP also contributes to establishing transportation choices that will help meet the needs of our communities in the future.

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