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Scott Wilk: A rational repurpose: Train or water?

By Scott Wilk
Right Here, Right Now
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If I had an opportunity to travel in time, I wouldn't mind going back to 2008 and voting twice against Proposition 1A, the High Speed Rail Project. Luckily for me — and you — another bite at the apple is still a possibility.

Over the years, California has allowed its aging infrastructure to deteriorate and its investment in maintenance to become an afterthought.

Not only does California lack 21st century schools and transportation systems — we aren't even maintaining what we already have. No issue reveals this problem more clearly than our state's ongoing drought and water infrastructure crisis.

Currently, 49 percent of our water flows back into the Pacific Ocean. And water being our state's most precious resource, we must fundamentally change our ways.

Last April, Gov. Jerry Brown called for urban users to reduce their water use by 25 percent. However, this accounts for only 2.5 percent of California's water supply, which does not solve our over-arching water problem.

Brown's water rationing highlighted the negligence your political leaders have shown toward water infrastructure — and Californians clearly took notice.

In June 2015, shortly after the governor's announcement, the Public Policy Institute of California found that for the first time, Californians named water and the drought the most important issue facing the state.

Moreover, a Hoover Institution Golden State Poll from December 2015 confirmed this sentiment and found that a majority, 53 percent, of Californians favor ending the High-Speed Rail and instead using unspent money on water storage projects.

Even so, the governor continues to ignore the people, focusing not on the difficult work of charting a course for the future of water infrastructure, but instead on his legacy project: a shiny new train he imagines as a symbol of the "California Comeback."

While I would love to take a train from Los Angeles to San Francisco to catch the Dodgers play the Giants, I wouldn't dare jeopardize the future success of California at the expense of taxpayers.

The High-Speed Rail was sold to voters in 2008 under the guise of public good, but support has been declining in the face of little results and deceptive cost estimates.

This past October, the Los Angeles Times published a piece claiming the Rail Authority withheld specific documents in a 2014 report presented to the Legislature.

The documents featured in the story revealed that the Authority had projected two separate cost estimates to complete the first segment of the project, a difference of \$9 billion!

While the California High-Speed Rail Authority's 2008 Business Plan specifies that construction should have begun in 2012, consistent setbacks have delayed the project and progress is nonexistent.

The original \$33.5 billion cost was supposed to be covered with a combination of one-third state funds, one-third federal funds, and one-third private funds.

Here we are, almost eight years later, and we now know that the total cost will be at least twice that amount, \$68 billion to \$80 billion, and no private funds have surfaced.

How much will this project cost the Californian taxpayers?

If you use the original estimate, it would cost \$9.95 billion, and the repayment of the High-Speed Rail bonds would cost California's general fund \$647 million per year for 30 years, or \$20 billion.

If you use the most recent estimates, those costs would easily double.

Water, on the other hand, is necessary for survival, food, and the success of our state. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, California ranks No. 1 in water infrastructure needs in the nation — indicating that California could use \$44.5 billion in the next two decades to fix aging water systems.

That is why last week I introduced Assembly Bill 1866, which would give voters the chance to terminate the sale of bonds for the High-Speed Rail in November 2016 and repurpose up to \$8 billion to fund much-needed water projects.

These water projects would include the construction of desalination facilities, wastewater treatment and recycling facilities, reservoirs, water conveyance infrastructure, and aquifer recharge.

The infrastructure program would provide a more comprehensive long-term water strategy for California and be vital to the overall quality of life for all Californians.

Brown's High-Speed Rail project has proven itself to be a failure, and while I may not be able to travel back in time and stop this runaway train, AB 1866 will ensure we spend those taxpayer dollars in a more rational, responsible way.

Assemblyman Scott Wilk, R-Santa Clarita, represents the 38th Assembly District, including the Santa Clarita and Simi valleys and portions of the northwestern San Fernando Valley. He resides in the Santa Clarita Valley.

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