THE DOWNTOWN RAIL EXTENSION, HIGH-SPEED RAIL, AND THE PATH LESS TRAVELED

Joe Mathews

How is California ever going to finish high-speed rail when it still can't finish the Downtown Rail Extension?

I can't read Gavin Newsom's mind, much less divine what he meant, or meant to mean, when he offered confusing and much-debated comments in the State of the State speech about the future the state's high-speed rail project.

But I can tell you that he is intimately familiar with the Downtown Rail Extension, or DTX, which means he comes by his skepticism of transportation projects honestly. Because the history of DTX is so messy that it makes California High-Speed Rail look like a Swiss watch by comparison.

DTX, which is a vital but unrealized proposal for a 1.3-mile rail extension connecting a commuter rail station near the Giants ballpark with a new transit center downtown, embodies the massive failure of California transportation planning and execution.

For all the struggles of this state and its local communities to build big infrastructure projects like high-speed rail or the Delta water tunnels, we Californians are even worse at the little stuff. Ours is a state that has constructed two rail lines that reach the edge of LAX, but don't go into the airport. Disneyland has its own railroad but no rail link to the park itself. San Diego's signature trolley doesn't go to its world-famous zoo.

The failure to complete DTX is even more embarrassing than those gaps. DTX is the latest attempt to bridge one of the smallest but most troublesome gaps in California's infrastructure gap—a gap that dates to the Civil War. The fundamental problem is that trains approaching San Francisco from the Peninsula to the South stop a little more than a mile short of the city's downtown job center around Market Street. To use the transportation parlance of our times, the gap is California's original "first mile/last mile" sin.

San Francisco has blown more than a century's worth of opportunities to bridge the gap. The best chance may have been back after the earthquake and fire in 1906, and a plan to build a downtown rail station was proposed and dropped because of the rush to get something built quickly for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition.

After the Second World War, a BART line to San Mateo County would have bridged the gap, but the county pulled out of BART and no line was built. In every single decade since, various city, county, and state agencies have argued for an underground rail tunnel connecting rail operations south of downtown with the center of the city to no avail. The idea heated up in the 1980s, when the state took over what was called the Peninsula Commute and created the Caltrain Commuter rail service. But nothing happened.

Then, in 1996, then-San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown appointed a local restauranteur and political newcomer named Gavin Newsom to a vacant seat on the Parking and Traffic Commission. And that time, the Downtown Rail Extension was a top priority of everyone in San Francisco who worried about traffic and transit.

In the mid-1990s, it appeared that the DTX's time had finally come. An environmental impact report was prepared for the DTX. And in 1999, San Francisco voters approved Proposition H, which mandated the extension finally be built, to connect Caltrain to a new Transbay Transit Center. During the campaign, the downtown extension's cost was estimated at $600 million.

Still, nothing could jumpstart the program. When Newsom was mayor in 2004, new plans were made for the extension, and in 2010, ground broke on the Transbay Transit Center. But that project ran so over budget that it ended up grabbing the $600 million for DTX. And Newsom's successor as mayor, Ed Lee, stalled the project by proposing a new path for the extension so that it would reach new housing in Mission Bay and a new arena for basketball's Warriors. A study of possible paths was supposed to take eight months; it took 5 years. It wasn't until fall 2018 that an alignment for the extension, along Pennsylvania Avenue, was finally approved.

The Transbay Transit Center was completed in 2018 and opened to the public, but it had to be closed temporarily to correct construction defects. And the place seemed empty—the world's most expensive bus station. There was no rail link to it: DTX still hadn't been approved.

That means in 23 years—a period in which Newsom got married, was elected mayor, got divorced, got remarried, was elected lieutenant governor, had four kids, and got elected governor—a rail project of 1.3 miles has gone exactly nowhere. And the best-case scenario is that DTX would open in 2027—a year after Newsom would leave office if he serves two terms.

This may tell us something about Newsom's deep skepticism about high-speed rail and other transportation projects. For all the governor's lion-like roars about the need for transformational projects in health care, education and housing, he has been talking like a mouse when it comes to infrastructure.

The DTX was supposed to carry both Caltrain and the high-speed rail, according to plans. But years ago, the first phase of high-speed rail was downsized, so it would stop at San Jose. In his first State of the State speech, Newsom appeared to declare that high-speed rail wouldn't even get that far: the rail would run only from Merced to Bakersfield.

Newsom's switch in the project, compared with a confusing and confrontational delivery, was a disaster for high-speed rail. Before Newsom's speech, high-speed rail faced an effective $8 billion shortfall in what it needed to connect the San Joaquin Valley with the Silicon Valley. But it had time—eight years—to fill the gap. And there were promising sources of funding. Democrats who support the project had just taken the House of Representatives. Google, which is planning a second headquarters and other major development near Diridon Station in San Jose, which would have been the terminus of high-speed rail, was expected to help finance it.

But Newsom, by stepping back from valley-to-valley and downsizing the project, actually made its finances worse. Building north from Madera to Merced, and south all the way to downtown Bakersfield, would add more than $3 billion to the costs. Newsom switched to the Merced-to-Bakersfield route recklessly, without even waiting for a state report on the possibility to be completed this spring. And the governor infuriated federal transportation officials who had been supporting the project by failing to give them any heads up on the policy change. They learned about it through the speech, and immediately began working to seize back some $3.5 billion in federal moneys for high-speed rail. In effect, Newsom's announcement on high-speed rail was a nearly $7 billion mistake.

At the same time, Newsom's instinct to slow down and rethink the project is understandable. And as one transportation scholar observed, the only real surprise was that Californians were surprised that Newsom did it. And the governor actually followed the foolish lead of High-Speed Rail Authority staffers who convinced administration officials that it would be good to get some piece of high-speed rail up and running, as proof of concept.

In the 23 years since he first encountered DTX as a rookie public official, he'd seen some projects progress with struggle (like the Central Subway in San Francisco) and others flounder and fail. And he'd seen newly elected officials call audibles on major construction projects. Governors Wilson and Schwarzenegger both stalled the new east span of the Bay Bridge to reconsider it, in the process adding to delays on the scandalously expensive and unsafe project. The east span was such a disaster that the governor and other top officials wouldn't attend its opening. It was left to Newsom, then the lieutenant governor, to handle the ceremony.

There are huge lessons to be drawn from California's transportation failures, larger and small. Every project needs a clear and accountable champion. These projects need dedicated staffs with technical expertise and real power; too many projects rely on too many expensive and unaccountable outside consultants. Such projects need realistic budgets, more financial commitment from taxpayers, and far greater urgency.

And the state needs to look to proven technologies and experiences from other states and other countries. There are all kinds of successful examples of short connecting rail tunnels and high-speed rail projects from around the world. But DTX and high-speed rail and other California projects have too often pursued their own novel ideas, rather than the tried-and-true.

If high-speed rail ends up diminished or dead, Newsom can console himself with this. It won't be nearly as bad a failure as DTX. The latest estimates for that 1.3-mile project, which includes a couple new stations, has ballooned to $6.1 billion. High-speed rail may be an $80 billion project,

but if it were as expensive per-mile as DTX, connecting Los Angeles to San Francisco would cost over $2 trillion.