

**Loco Motives** [no date, likely 11/17/09 or 11/18/09]**Two train proposals race to provide fast and cheap trips to Vegas—but one involves planes, politics and peril for the Mojave**

By: Tommy Purvis

The Mojave National Preserve might be young but it already could be out of time. The threats posed by a proposed transportation network at the California-Nevada Stateline have settled on the horizon and the future of the desert does not look good.

Two different train proposals—California-Nevada Interstate Maglev and Desert Xpress—are pitching the same thing: cheap, super-quick trips to Las Vegas. But the train project—and its related development—that seems to be gaining the most traction is also the one that poses a dire threat to the Mojave and gambles with the future of the area's endangered species.

**Hope for the desert**

Policy makers and developers have pushed the Xpress high-speed rail line and the Ivanpah Valley Airport as the answer to the overburdened I-15 packed with tourists headed to unkempt growth on the Strip. The mass transit network, however, would spoil more than the serenity of the pristine land.

Noise and light pollution from jumbo jets and electric diesel engines would damage beyond repair an ecosystem that supports endangered species. Train tracks would block animal migration routes. The largest Joshua tree forest on the globe—already vulnerable to climate changes—could combust into wildfire if sparks flew from DX's overhead power lines.

Urban sprawl would eventually cover the Ivanpah Valley with asphalt and concrete. The increased tourist traffic through the preserve would lead to more roadside trash. The last time the Mojave faced this much danger, Caltrans pioneers were thinking of detonating 22 nuclear explosions to cut through the Bristol Mountains west of Needles.

With the prospect of these projects close, a Nevada senator, a high-pedigree lobbyist, casino-resort developers and various other high rollers have placed their bets.

There is very little opposition to protect the Mojave National Preserve. Adding to the drama, special interests from the Xpress camp have launched an effort to railroad the California-Nevada Interstate Maglev, the other train proposal that uses magnetic technology instead of traditional wheels and tracks. Maglev would deliver tourists to the Strip and create long-term jobs.

It could also save the desert ecosystem.

The Xpress and the Ivanpah airport proposals would be a tragic end to the 1.6 million acres tucked neatly between the I-15 and I-40 in the Mojave. The land was federally designated as protected only 15 years ago by the Clinton administration when the then-president signed the California Desert Protection Act.

### **Fastest train in the world**

The Amtrak Desert Wind still serviced the Los Angeles-Las Vegas corridor 20 years ago when the California-Nevada Super Speed Train Commission started an effort to connect gamblers and casinos on a dedicated high-speed line.

But as the Strip boomed, the Amtrak service folded and the I-15 proved to be the congested route of choice. The commission continued to pressure Congress with a bold solution: to build a magnetic train that would connect downtown Las Vegas with Anaheim in 86 minutes at speeds up to 310 mph on 269 miles of elevated track.

It would be the fastest train in the world and make two stops in San Bernardino County, one at Ontario airport and another near the historic Barstow Depot on Route 66. When operated at maximum capacity, enough passengers could use the progressive technology to equal a freshly poured eight-lane freeway—minus the greenhouse gases.

The scope of the project is forecasted to boost U.S. domestic steel output by 4 percent for eight years in a row. Along the entire I-15 corridor it is estimated that the Maglev project would create 97,000 jobs. The \$12.1 billion dollar investment (\$1.8 billion from Washington) would net the federal government about \$173 million a year in direct and indirect taxes.

It would take mechanics, electricians, steel workers and concrete finishers to build the system. When completed, the IE would no longer be fly-over or drive-through territory for domestic and international travelers. The tourism sector would boom with the increased air traffic into Ontario airport, which is ready to handle the increased capacity. It would also make Ivanpah unneeded and save \$7 billion dollars. The route already includes a stop at Stateline.

When hotel rooms sell out for the biggest of the Las Vegas conventions, the backlog could follow the Maglev route instead of the interstate. The Southern California Association of Governments has endorsed the proposal.

It might sound like a pipedream but the Maglev seemed as close to being completed in a decade's time when Sen. Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada) pushed through \$45 million last April to seed the initial phase of the project from downtown Las Vegas to the California-Nevada Stateline. The senator told the media if the project were built it would be the showboat of the world.

But that all changed.

### **Master of persuasion**

Before ground could be broken, the Xpress camp reached out to Reid's office with a last-minute proposal to build a Victorville-Las Vegas high-speed rail line to serve as the region's transportation solution.

Meanwhile, Maglev developers waited for paperwork to be processed by the Federal Railroad Administration.

Then, Sigmund Rogich, a former George W. Bush lobbyist and master at the art of persuasion, entered the picture. Rogich was the national advertising director for the 1984 Ronald Reagan campaign. But to insiders on the Strip, "Sig" is known for the ad agency that he co-founded in the '70s that went on to create the "What happens in

Vegas” campaign for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority after Rogich left. Mike Tyson contacted him after he bit Evander Holyfield’s ear so he could get a license to box in Nevada again.

Rogich then formed The Rogich Communication Group, a Vegas-based outfit that serves as a business facilitator, public relations and crisis management firm. Even with these responsibilities, Sig finds time to co-chair Republicans for Reid. The group of over 100 high-profile Las Vegans has endorsed the Democrat in 2010. The list includes both state and local politicians, casino developers, boxing officials and Mr. Las Vegas himself, Wayne Newton.

If the Xpress were built it would not be the first time Rogich pushed public opinion on a transit project. The Robert N. Broadbent Las Vegas Monorail is named after the consultant that worked with Rogich Communications that helped the project secure private financing.

Built on the cheap, the design and route make it hard to access the monorail from the Strip. It also failed to connect McCarran International Airport to Las Vegas Boulevard’s mega resorts, and taxpayers will have to bail it out next year. The monorail cars are wrapped in corporate advertisements.

### **Bio Doom**

Despite the powerful pitchman, the Xpress proposal, combined with the Ivanpah airport development, would ruin the Mojave preserve forever.

The National Park Service feels the impending doom and has aired formal concerns that the Federal Aviation Administration, Bureau of Land Management and Clark County officials are supposed to weigh as they consider the development. An alternative airport proposal wouldn’t be operable until at least 2017.

Of particular concern to Linda Slater, chief of resource interpretation and outreach at Mojave, is the Clark Mountain area that lies just across the Nevada border in San Bernardino County. The flight pattern for 747s and other jumbo jets will circle the area every two minutes, which is also, the northern flank of the protected territory.

The noise and light pollution will push through an area that bighorn sheep use to birth their young and desert tortoises use to lay eggs and graze on flowers that bloom after spring rainstorms.

“The species of desert tortoise found in this part of the Mojave are genetically different than the ones found in other parts of the desert,” says Ilene Anderson, a biological scientist from the Center for Biological Diversity in L.A. She says that some tortoises in the Mojave are old enough to have survived the tanks from Patton’s Army that trained here to fight in WWII.

But each time a 30-year old building is imploded on Las Vegas Boulevard., the misty-eyed native who reminisces about it being the end of an era gets all the face time.

Off road enthusiasts that stand to lose a giant sandbox were the most organized during meetings in Clark County. Elected officials from California were not invited to participate. The National Park Conservation Association requested to hold meetings in San Bernardino County but was denied by the FAA office in San Francisco, even though the air traffic will fly over both states.

### **On track for flaws?**

There are other problems with the Xpress proposals.

Initially, a three-person panel of Bush appointees classified this passenger train idea as a “freight rail line” before the environmental impact statement process had even begun.

Doing so gave Xpress an unfair advantage as its environmental impact process was able to speed along without the strict oversight and stringent guidelines that the Maglev proposal, properly classified as high-speed passenger rail, adhered to.

The Xpress plan also involves carving up the Mojave National Preserve to save money on costlier alternatives. Since the grade is too steep near the I-15 corridor near Clark Mountain, the Xpress plans to tunnel through and level out the land out of Ivanpah Valley.

The “steel on wheel” technology the Xpress—which comes with a \$5 billion price tag—uses is also outdated and is the reason the route ends at the Cajon Pass.

The Xpress would still have to purchase land in the preserve from the National Park Service if Congress first approves the transaction. The Maglev would not require a tunnel or land from Mojave as it can deal with grades Xpress cannot.

Another flaw: Xpress and Sen. Reid assume passengers will brave a few hours of rush hour traffic and park in the north end of Victor Valley just to board the train. A ticket for a one-way 80-minute fare on the 150-mph DX to Las Vegas would cost \$50—five bucks cheaper than a one-way ticket for the entire Las Vegas-Anaheim Maglev route.

Even the Government Accountability Office raised concerns over the Xpress terminus being located outside of L.A. and questioned “whether travelers will use the line at the level being forecast.”

### **False impressions**

It was hot in downtown Las Vegas in July when Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, Sen. Reid and officials from both the DX and Maglev gathered for the Los Angeles-Las Vegas high-speed corridor designation ceremony.

The event put the Maglev and Xpress in line for a portion of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Through the influence of Reid’s office both transportation projects stand for a portion of the \$8 billion in the stimulus package.

The media left with the impression that the Xpress was already chosen as the winner of the funds. Reid talked up the DX as the “first shovel ready high-speed rail project in the nation.”

The Transportation Secretary’s office seemed displeased with the senator’s shenanigans and promptly issued a statement that made it clear no decisions had been made.

So the endgame plays out and the DX and Maglev developers plot their next moves. The outcome could lift a region out of the Great Recession. It could also disenchant the little girl from the IE that has never partied under the great neon glow but can remember the first time she gazed into the aura of the Milky Way under the stars in the Mojave.

Either way, when these cards fall, someone is going to have to figure out how to get all these people water.