



THE R.V.:

The DesertXpress media event was a dud. Trouble for high-speed rail?

Here's the checklist for a recent press conference designed to boost public confidence in a \$6 billion high-speed rail line being built between Las Vegas and Southern California:

- A beautiful LEED-certified Science and Engineering Building, home to University of Nevada Las Vegas' Transportation Research Center.
- Cool model of the train station in scenic Victorville, CA, and colorful maps and renderings of the DesertXpress high-speed train.
- Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, the man leading the charge to implement President Barack Obama's vision of building a high-speed rail network in the United States.
- Sen. Harry Reid, arguably the most powerful man in the Senate and the lawmaker most responsible for putting DesertXpress on track after being frustrated about the lack of progress on a magnetic-levitation system put forth by the California-Nevada Superspeed Train Commission.
- Susan Martinovich, Nevada's top transportation official, who has written letters to the Federal Railroad Administration asking for a record of decision that would have funded an environmental assessment of the first 40 miles of the maglev project, from Las Vegas to Primm, on the California state line.

Noticeably absent was a representative of DesertXpress Enterprises, which is building the 185-mile dual track and contracting with Canadian transportation company Bombardier to develop America's first high-speed system on an exclusively dedicated track.

A public announcement like this without the company that's putting the pieces together?

Incredibly, that was the setting late last month when Reid and LaHood, who did most of the talking, announced completion of the final environmental impact statement for the DesertXpress route.

It's an important step, but not unexpected.

With the final report in hand, DesertXpress can now get permits and complete engineering based on the document's preferred routes. Several alternatives were listed in the draft report. The final report lists the preferences with the blessing of the Federal Railroad Administration, the Bureau of Land Management, the Surface Transportation Board, the Federal Highway Administration and the National Park Service.

Andrew Mack, chief operating officer of DesertXpress, was in attendance at the high-powered announcement, but sat on the sideline as the event unfolded. After Reid, LaHood and the other speakers were done, Mack made himself available to the media, answering as many questions as he could about what had just happened.

I had asked Reid and LaHood what recommendation had been reached in the environmental impact statement about a key question for Las Vegas: Where would the train station be? They didn't have an answer because they hadn't reviewed the report themselves. Even Mack hadn't yet seen it.

Now there's a confidence builder.

I've since read through the report, which recommends two of the four options available. One site is west of Interstate 15, just north of Russell Road, across the highway from Mandalay Bay. The other site is also west of I-15, just south of Flamingo Road near the Rio. Not recommended was a site west of I-15 but north of Flamingo even closer to the Rio and a downtown site near the Plaza.

Some have suggested that this was just a calculated political opportunity for LaHood and Reid to show that the administration's goal of developing a national high-speed train network is on track and they didn't want DesertXpress people to have to answer difficult and inevitable questions.

Like whether this 19th century-era rail is superior to maglev technology.

Like whether anybody really believes people will drive to Victorville to ride a train to Las Vegas or whether Las Vegans would take the train there and rent a car to go the rest of the way to L.A.

Like who, if anybody, plans to build the 50-mile track between Victorville and Palmdale, CA, the essential link to the California High-Speed Rail line. Everybody seems to support the concept, but nobody has come forward to say, "Yes, we'll build it."

If those questions can be answered satisfactorily, the public may be more comfortable with DesertXpress.

If not, other questions emerge.

Like, is DesertXpress doomed to failure?

And, is this what President Obama had in mind about high-speed rail?

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