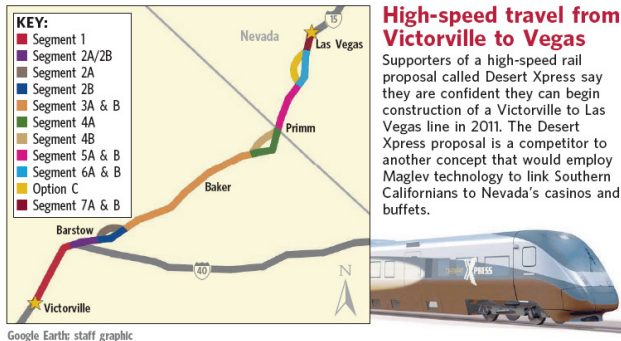


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High-speed rail firm sees 2011 start

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VICTORVILLE - Proponents of a high-speed train that would link this High Desert city to Las Vegas say they are confident that the impending completion of environmental and financial plans will allow construction of a new rail line to begin in 2011.

"There will probably be at least some type of ground breaking, but the heavy construction will begin in 2011," Desert Xpress president Tom Stone said by teleconference on Thursday.

The Desert Xpress proposal would allow Southern California passengers to park their cars in Victorville and ride the rails through the Mojave Desert on their way to Sin City. The idea is not

the only proposal for a new route to Las Vegas - others have backed an even more high-tech concept that would employ hovering Maglev trains.

Both proposals would let Southern California travelers bypass desert traffic jams and seemingly interminable waits at the 15 Freeway's agricultural inspection station on the return trip. Potential sacrifices include skipping well-known eating spots like the Mad Greek in Baker or In N Out Burger in Barstow.

The Desert Xpress and Maglev options could respectively reach costs in the neighborhoods of \$5 billion or \$12 billion to \$15 billion. Neither side has announced a completed financing arrangement, and the Federal Railroad Administration has not yet approved environmental statements for either plan.

Those on the Desert Xpress side assert that they can accomplish their project with private funding - although they may seek a federal loan - and can begin construction well before a Maglev line could happen.

Desert Xpress executives expect to make an announcement in about one month regarding a major investor for their project, Stone said. He said those talks are confidential.

Construction of Desert Xpress is projected to require three years. Future travelers could pay an average one-way fare of \$55.

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Victorville councilmen Mike Rothschild and Terry Caldwell participated in the same conference while at the Grumpy Golfer near Victorville's Green Tree Golf Course.

The councilmen were confident the Desert Xpress will become a reality. They said the vision includes a sophisticated train station that will let Las Vegas-bound riders to check in their luggage and find their bags waiting for them at their hotel of choice.

"It really enhances the reputation of not just Victorville, but the entire Victor Valley as a place to do business, where government is receptive to what it needs to do to create jobs," Caldwell said.

Rothschild and Caldwell also said the high-speed rail option would make it possible for Desert Xpress to one day be connected with the planned California High Speed Rail network.

The High Speed Rail Authority's maps show proposed routes that would link cities including Ontario, Riverside, Los Angeles, Sacramento and San Francisco.

High-speed rail involves steel wheels on a steel track. Desert Xpress' draft environmental report shows that the trains may be powered by diesel-electric engines or electric propulsion systems that the company maintains could reach speeds of 150 mph and travel from Victorville to Las Vegas in about 84 minutes.

Maglev, or magnetic levitation, trains would never even touch their tracks. Magnetic force is employed to zip carriages along a track, and proponents say this option would let trains to reach 300 mph.

The Maglev proposal, also known as the California- Nevada Super Speed Train Project, would require a substantial investment of taxpayer money and take more time to be built. The completion of environmental documentation could take 18 to 24 months, with construction requiring four to five years, said M. Neil Cummings, president of American Magline Group.

But Cummings also said the Maglev option has advantages over the Desert Xpress proposal. Besides the capability to reach higher speeds, the current Maglev plan would not require travelers from the Inland Empire and greater Los Angeles to drive to Victorville.

Planners instead want to build track that would allow trains to climb the Cajon Pass and reach stations in Ontario and Anaheim.

"The Inland Empire really has to look at the future," Cummings said. "If you build a high-speed train, you want to do one that connects the entire corridor."

The Maglev group's website shows lists potential sources as federal appropriations or federal, state or local bonds. Maglev backers are also counting on \$7 billion from the Export-Import

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Bank of China, Cummings said.

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