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High-speed rail project promising

Looking to the future is an inexact science. Planning major public projects can be an expensive and time-consuming process.

While one would likely gasp at the thought of spending billions of dollars on a high-speed rail network for California, especially in these tight times, it makes perfect sense on a number of fronts. It should be actively pursued and embraced as a viable alternative to today's overtaxed transportation systems.

As envisioned in preliminary plans, the San Joaquin Valley would comprise about a third of the state's high-speed rail system. To get to its northern and southern terminals, high speed rail has to pass through, as well as stop, in the Valley.

An environmental impact report just released by the California High-Speed Rail Authority states it could cost \$82 billion between now and 2020 to build enough roads and airports to accommodate the state's increasing population. It would cost about \$33 billion, less than half that amount, to build a high-speed rail system - and it wouldn't take 20 years to accomplish.

If the state were able to afford all the new highways and airport improvements needed in the next two decades, it's a sure bet this added conventional infrastructure would put significant loads and demands on the environment, especially when contrasted by a non-polluting, environmentally friendly transportation mode like high-speed rail. Californians like to travel and need to get from place to place for work and recreation; a high-speed rail system should satisfy this need without adding burdens to already sizable pollution levels.

Our highways and freeways already are congested beyond their capacity and we doubt adding more lanes to existing roads and even new routes will do much to ease the state's traffic burdens.

The San Joaquin Valley has been classified as one of the most polluted regions in the entire United States, so anything that can be done to clean up our air deserves serious consideration.

Thankfully, the technology that drives high-speed rail has been perfected many times, particularly in Europe and Japan, where rapid-paced rail travel at more than 200 mph is commonplace. It's a matter of determining routes, buying the right-of-way, building the system and acquiring the equipment, not simple, but still achievable.

Merced County looks to become a major player in the high-speed rail system. One of the connections contemplated between the San Joaquin Valley and the Bay Area would go through Pacheco Pass in Merced County; another option would tunnel through the Diablo mountain range northwest of Newman in Stanislaus County.

A gauge of public support for high-speed rail is coming this November. A \$9.9 billion bond issue is destined for the ballot that would get the system rolling if voters approve. Some are calling to push off the vote for at least a year until the state's economic health improves. Either way, we think it deserves support.

The Valley also stands to reap considerable benefit if high speed rail gets implemented. It's expected high-speed rail would create 450,000 jobs, some of which would go to Valley residents. If Merced County were to land a maintenance base and stations for the new system, that also would mean large economic benefits for the area.

We think high speed rail makes economic sense for the state and the Valley. Local residents, community leaders and elected representatives need to keep pushing for inclusion of this vital long-term transportation alternative in the face of budgetary distress.