

Call to Rip Up Rails Wrong for Del Mar and our Region Dwight Worden

This commentary presents my personal views and does not necessarily reflect the positions of my city council colleagues or of the City of Del Mar.

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On October 4 the Union Tribune ran a commentary by Peter Cramton entitled: Opinion: The Coaster train doesn't make sense for San Diego anymore. Let's turn it into a trail.

Here are some high level points the opinion piece misses:

- **The Coaster Is Not The Only Train Using The Tracks.** Amtrak, Metrolink, the Coaster, freight on BNSF, and military use of the rail line as part of the Strategic Rail Corridor Network (STRACNET) all depend on this rail line. It currently carries 60 trains per day going soon to 100. It provides the only San Diego connection to the national rail system. It's the second busiest passenger rail corridor in the country¹, and it provides essential service to the Port of San Diego and its 8 billion per year of economic activity. None if this is replaced by a trail.
- **Trains Reduce Fossil Fuels and Freeway Congestion.** Every freight rail car has the potential to remove 3-4 semi-trucks from the highways, every passenger train removes cars from our highways reducing congestion and emissions, and reducing the need for expensive freeway expansions². The emissions reductions are true for the current high tech diesel train engines, and train engines will soon be zero emission using technology well under development.
- **SANDAG Doesn't Have the Legal Authority to Eliminate the Train and Turn it Into a Trail.** Federal and state agencies need to make that decision. The Federal Surface Transportation Board, Amtrak, NCTD, BNSF, the Department of Defense, and a number of other federal and state agencies would be involved. NCTD, not SANDAG, owns the rail line.
- **Proposing Closure Is Like Don Quixote Tilting At Windmills.** These federal and state agencies (and NCTD and BNSF) all support continuance and expansion of the rail system, not closure. Same for our local elected federal and state representatives. Same for the adopted SANDAG, State, and Federal rail plans. All these support this rail line as a key part of the rail system, and for good reason! If Mr. Cramton and others truly believe the rail line should be closed and

¹ There are more than 500 operating railroads in the U.S. The North East Corridor is the busiest rail corridor carrying 260 million passengers a year. The LOSASAN corridor is 2nd carrying 8 million.

² Note that the claims of Dan Quirk and others that the tunnel is the most expensive SANDAG project ever are not accurate. The SANDAG North Coast Corridor project has a \$6 billion budget.

turned into a trail, they need to take their arguments to the powers who control that decision and advocate why they should reverse field and change their plans. Arguing that SANDAG should eliminate the train is tilting at Windmills.

- **A Cost Benefit Analysis is Required by Law and by SANDAG and Will Be Done.** To imply, as some have done, that a cost benefit study won't be done unless we demand it, is to create a false impression. A cost benefit study will be done whether we ask for it or not as required by federal law to qualify for federal funds. The required study will be the gold standard, not Mr. Cramton's rough calculations or mine. Mr. Crampton estimated a cost per round trip of \$132 to cover the tunnel cost. My white paper estimates a \$24 per ride cost³. One thing is clear though: the \$1 million per ride cost estimate widely disseminated in the Del Mar community by Dan Quirk (eblast dated October 4, 2023) is way off.
- **We Can Influence SANDAG's Selection of a Tunnel Alignment.** SANDAG's job is to relocate the rails off the eroding bluff to a location somewhere between the ocean and the I-5 and to get it done by 2035. It's a key project under the SANDAG Regional Transportation Plan, and is essential for public safety, economic, military, congestion management, and environmental reasons. SANDAG is studying many options for achieving this goal. We can influence that decision, and we should. The 19 SANDAG Board members will ultimately make the decision on a tunnel alignment. Del Mar has only one vote of those 19. We need to influence other board members to support us, but we squander our influence arguing that SANDAG can close the train and turn it into a trail when we know they can't. Let's keep our eye on the issues we can influence and not be viewed as tilting at windmills.
- **I support a Trail to Replace the Rails on the Bluff When a Tunnel Alignment Has Been Selected.** It's easy to throw around wildly inaccurate numbers like \$1 million a ride, or to argue the trains go by empty when the ridership figures prove otherwise. It's easy to appeal to everyone about how great a trail would be, and it's easy to scare people with unsubstantiated claims that a tunnel will require rampant use of eminent domain. All these claims are intended to scare us about a tunnel and to make us feel good that eliminating the train is a credible argument. But, none of these claims is accurate. We need to stay grounded in facts. If we do, we can help locate a tunnel that is best for Del Mar and we can minimize impacts of portals, ventilation, construction, noise, vibration, and successfully address other key tunnel related issues. Then we can get our trail.

³Both Mr. Cramton's and my rough calculations attribute the entire tunnel cost to passengers only, and allocate none of the cost to freight or military use, to the millions per year paid by BNSF to use the rails, to passenger ticket revenue, or to the avoided costs of freeway expansion and climate costs. This is why both are rough and why we all need to wait for the required federal analysis.