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August 5, 2010

Curt Pringle
Board Chairman
California High Speed Rail Authority
925 L Street, Suite 1425
Sacramento CA 95814

Dear Chairman Pringle and Members of the HSRA Board:

SPUR is a member-supported public policy organization that works to promote good planning and good government. We are headquartered in San Francisco and have more than 3,500 members who reside throughout the Bay Area.

In that context, we believe that the California High Speed Rail project is the most important statewide infrastructure improvement that we have considered in more than 50 years. We are extremely supportive of the project and we believe it should be implemented as soon as possible.

The importance of HSR is immense and the failure to deliver the project would be devastating to our generation and future generations. We note that, by itself, HSR is projected to reduce statewide greenhouse gas emissions by more than one percent—a huge benefit from just one project. Just as importantly, the HSR project greatly reinforces appropriate urban form and function in cities across the state. Moving these cities to a more urban and dense form, which can most effectively be done through the HSR system, is of vital statewide interest. It will allow Central Valley growth to be funneled to existing urban areas, thereby reducing water demand and infrastructure needs, decreasing the cost of housing, and reducing pollution from driving.

While SPUR realizes that there are some impacts on some local areas, the importance of this project for California's future—a future that is of one State connected—cannot be overstressed. That is the overriding need and the overriding commitment to future generations.

We understand that some residents along the Peninsula south of San Francisco oppose the idea of trains coming through their communities. Such opposition is completely normal and to be expected. It is the job of the rest of us to keep the big picture in mind and ensure that the overwhelming benefits of High Speed Rail are realized.

It is absolutely essential for the success of the system that the trains make it all the way to the Transbay Terminal in San Francisco.

San Francisco and the Bay Area have made a substantial commitment to the Transbay Transit Center, which, by law must be designed for HSR trains. Our City and region have committed millions of dollars designing this building specifically for rail service and have committed vast amounts of political capital to provide a home worthy of the promise of HSR. There can be little doubt that the downtown San Francisco TTC terminal will generate more traffic and more revenue than any other alternative location; indeed the financial viability of the HSR system would be in jeopardy without a TTC terminal.

Similarly, we believe that SFO must be served by HSR trains. One of the main benefits of HSR trains is to free up limited and expensive airport runway capacity. We need to remove as many connecting passengers out of small planes going to Fresno, Sacramento and Bakersfield from SFO and onto HSR trains. That would free up runway space for higher capacity jets going longer distances. It just makes good economic sense to use our runways as efficiently as possible and HSR is an important tool in this regard.

Finally, we continue to be supportive of the Pacheco Pass alternative as it allows HSR trains to start in San Francisco and “top-off” in San Jose, running mostly full to the Central Valley and Los Angeles. This will help HSR seat occupancy and efficiency and make the project financial viable.

Of course there is much work still to be done working out the design details of the Peninsula segment of the High Speed Rail system. In particular, we would urge you to give full consideration to a “shared-use” arrangement on the Caltrain right-of-way and other approaches that could minimize the adverse impacts of the HSR project. The intent of these suggestions is not to question the decision to use the Caltrain alignment, but to reduce its costs and its impacts while still providing the important benefits of using this corridor.

We believe the Caltrain corridor is the only viable corridor to access both downtown San Francisco and SFO. We encourage you to study and refine the options for this important segment of the project, and we urge the Authority to proceed expeditiously to deliver this project both regionally and statewide.

Sincerely,

Gabriel Metcalf
Executive Director