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## High-speed rail planners revive Grapevine route

*The California High-Speed Rail Authority board votes to reconsider building the first 500-mile leg portion of the L.A.-to-Bay Area line along Interstate 5. That plan had been discarded in favor of a circuitous route through the Antelope Valley. Now, both plans will be considered.*

May 06, 2011 | By Rich Connell and Dan Weikel, Los Angeles Times

In a surprising and controversial move, California bullet train planners on Thursday revived a long-discarded route option following Interstate 5 over the Grapevine that could save billions of dollars and eliminate a sweeping dogleg through Los Angeles County's high desert towns.

The sudden reversal comes after years of planning focused on a circuitous path south of Bakersfield crossing the Tehachapi Mountains to serve Palmdale and Lancaster.

Reopening what had been a settled issue highlights a critical tension in one of the nation's costliest transportation projects: As officials rush to start building, they still have not resolved an array of political, financing and engineering challenges.

Thursday's vote by the California High-Speed Rail Authority board ignited new political conflicts for an agency struggling to scrape together billions needed to complete the first 500-mile leg of the voter-approved system between the Bay Area and downtown Los Angeles' Union Station.

Resurrecting a possible I-5 route "is a step backwards," said Los Angeles County Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich, who represents Palmdale and pushed for the Antelope Valley alignment when it was chosen several years ago. "The proposed action would jeopardize years' worth of commitments to a high-speed rail connection for Antelope Valley residents."

The city manager of Palmdale called the change "absurd." Both the Palmdale and I-5 routes will now be studied.

The Grapevine has a number of potential benefits, state officials say. It is nearly 30 miles shorter, would cut

travel time, reduce tunneling and save \$1 billion and perhaps more, they say.

Following the I-5 also sidesteps newly recognized earthquake risks along the Antelope Valley route, and dodges rising opposition from homeowners who have moved to new developments along the path paralleling California 14 to Palmdale. A Times analysis shows that the population near the highway has grown 24% in the last decade.

Ken Wipff, a member of the town council in Acton, south of Palmdale, said current alignment schemes would bring high-speed trains close to schools and include a viaduct through the center of the community. "The proposed routes are completely destructive of the town and its schools."

"There's been a big hue and cry," said Ruthann Levison, a resident of Sand Canyon, an enclave of ranch-style homes near the highway. Dozens of properties there would be in or near the path of trains. An I-5 route would spare her area. "We love it," she said of the Grapevine option.

But, as bullet train promoters are painfully aware, curing one headache often creates another. Developers planning a major mountain community at Tejon Ranch, along the I-5, warned the board Thursday that a Grapevine option could disrupt their project and cost the agency dearly for right of way.

Indeed, a Grapevine route poses its own engineering and seismic concerns, which was partly why it was rejected in the first place. They include negotiating the steep incline where I-5 drops into the Central Valley.

At the south end of the Grapevine, officials in the auto-dependant bedroom community of Santa Clarita are concerned about the disruption that rail construction could cause along the interstate corridor. "The 5 is our lifeblood," said Gail Ortiz, the city's communications manager. "We don't want to see that lifeblood jeopardized for something that could be pie in the sky."

Construction is slated to begin next year in the Central Valley, but critics warn the project could be derailed by high costs and opposition to additional funding from Republicans in Congress.

Some rail advocates argue the direct I-5 route always made more sense.

"Why go the long way?" said Richard Tolmach, director of the California Rail Foundation. "The I-5 option is not just good because it is cheaper and shorter; it also is good because it will permanently lower the cost of operations."

The plan to study the Grapevine option, which will take several months, was unanimously approved by the

rail authority board. But Chairman Curt Pringle cautioned the vote could invite demands to revisit issues already decided elsewhere in the state.

"At what point in time," he asked, "do you stop saying we are going to reintroduce" route options that could "totally redirect" past actions?

"It's a fragile place," he said. "I think it opens the door and I'm concerned about that."

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