A Response to the SB 1098 Working Group Report

Executive Summary

The 351-mile LOSSAN Corridor, connecting San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Luis Obispo, is one of the nation's busiest passenger rail corridors, but it faces serious threats from coastal erosion and service disruptions, flagging ridership recovery, and increasingly strained funding that existing governance has failed to adequately address. This as Southern California prepares to host the Olympics.

In 2024, the California legislature passed SB 1098 with a clear mandate to provide concrete recommendations for legislation to improve the LOSSAN corridor's service, resilience, and governance by the beginning of 2026. While the law required consultation with key stakeholders, opportunity for participation from rider groups and transit experts has been minimal. Related to the way in which stakeholder input was collected, the report as drafted does not address governance, project delivery, funding, and other reforms that are the root of the problems in the corridor.

In our response, Californians for Electric Rail and our coalition partners highlight many of the key reforms to governance and funding needed to deliver world-class regional transit throughout Southern California.

Coastal rail resilience is an urgent problem, and while the report suggests some improved procedures for handling emergency closures, there is little vision for a long term solution. Rerouting rail service off of erosion-prone bluffs and beaches in San Clemente and Del Mar must be treated with greater urgency, with CalSTA taking the lead on environmental review, geotechnical work, and design to expedite a permanent solution. To prevent future equipment-related disruptions, CalSTA should also consider adopting a financing model for rolling stock procurement and standardize rolling stock statewide. Bus bridges must be provided when service disruptions do occur - a practice that will be facilitated by proposed changes to governance.

Regional Rail in Southern California has a problem of too many cooks. With nine right of way owners and eleven different public agencies managing[1] service, coordination problems are common and parochial issues take precedence over frequent and reliable rail service that functions as a regional network. To address this, we propose transforming the governance of Metrolink, Surfliner, and Coaster from several partially overlapping joint powers authorities (JPAs) to a single agency with a single infrastructure manager, a dedicated operations funding source, and a board staffed with dedicated public servants, that balances regional perspective with local representation.

A structural reorganization that establishes a single governing body (the Southern California Rail Agency) for all three corridors will enable better project delivery, with more efficient use of state funds and better outcomes for riders. Agency consolidation has the potential to reduce redundancy and create economies of scale that enable increased utilization of in-house staff to deliver capital projects, a cost-saving measure. The new reorganization allows local resources to be reallocated into service planning and better focus on cross-agency service coordination, which would be strengthened by our recommendation to mandate use of service-led planning in regional transportation plans. We also recommend that Caltrans, via CalITP, set a timeline to implement a single payment card and cross-system transfer discounts along the lines of Clipper 2.0.

Funding is another essential item missing from the SB 1098 report. The newly consolidated Southern California Rail Agency must be able to authorize regional taxes to support operations, and receive a reliable state operations subsidy. Further, the state should restructure capital funding away from competitive grant programs, which encourage complex capital stacks, overreliance on consultants, and cost escalations and delays, and shift to a multi-year investment framework model that provides stable funding and state oversight on 4-6 year timescales.

Regarding Corridor ID, we support additional state intervention to deliver these projects. As such, we recommend that Caltrans Division of Rail be the primary program manager, deliverer, and host railroad liaison for all Corridor ID projects, and that Caltrans work to develop design standards that can be applied to all rail projects in the state.

We encourage the legislature to take seriously the need for reform and commit to action on recommendations to improve LOSSAN governance.

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[1] SCRRA (Metrolink) JPA, LOSSAN JPA, Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA), Ventura County Transportation Commission (VCTC), Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC), LA Metro, San Bernardino County Transportation Authority (SBCTA), San Diego Area Governments (SANDAG), San Diego Metropolitan Transportation System (NTS), North County Transportation District (NCTD), Santa Barbara Council of Governments (SBCOG) are all involved in service planning, budgeting, or capital project management to some degree.

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1. Introduction: The Importance of Ambitious Work on the LOSSAN Corridor

The LOSSAN corridor is the second highest ridership rail corridor in the US, after the Northeast Corridor. It connects California's two biggest cities and serves more than half of the population of California. The corridor contains three main services: the Surfliner, Amtrak branded, state-supported regional rail, Metrolink, the regional rail system for greater Los Angeles, and the Coaster, regional rail for San Diego County that overlaps with Metrolink in Oceanside. With 545 miles of track, Metrolink is one of the largest commuter rail agencies in the US by area, but its ridership lags that of systems covering fewer miles such as Caltrain and MBTA.[2]

In 2022, the California Air Resources Board (CARB) set goals for vehicle miles traveled (VMT) reduction of 25% from 2019 levels by 2030 - but as of 2025, the state was only 5% below[3] 2019, not on track to meet the goal. California has the largest share of "super commuters", those who drive at least an hour every day to work, in the country.[4] Regional rail is a critical part of the solution to both problems, as 75% of VMT is from long trips best replaced by rail.

Recognizing the importance of regional rail to other goals, the 2024 California State Rail Plan envisions substantially increased rail service, including new rail lines, in Southern California. Unfortunately, the service and reliability improvements associated with these investments have been slow to materialize. Metrolink's SCORE program, a $10B capital program funded through the state Transit and Intercity Rail Program (TIRCP) and intended to deliver systemwide 30 minute service by the 2028 Olympics, will now not deliver full 30 minute service on any line until 2029, with full buildout not complete until 2037.[5]

The LOSSAN corridor is also highly at risk to coastal erosion and sea level rise. Coastal erosion near San Clemente closed the Los Angeles to San Diego connection for more than a year between 2022 and 2024. Rerouting the corridor off the erosion-prone beaches and bluffs in south Orange County is a necessity for continued operation of the service, yet more than four years after initial closures potential routes have yet to be identified. The Del Mar tunnel in San Diego County is likewise essential for continued operation of the corridor, and is farther along, but environmental review is not set to complete for until 2028 - five years after the process initiated - with project completion still far in the future.

Southern California transit agencies also suffer from more basic challenges with coordination. Despite sharing the same infrastructure, code-sharing between Surfliner and other services is

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[2] https://multimodalmcmullen.com/us-commuter-rail-ridership-analysis-first-half-2025/

[3] https://tripnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/TRIP_Keeping_California_Mobile_Report_September_2025.pdf

[4] https://www.ppic.org/blog/super-commuters-in-california/

[5] https://legistarweb-production.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/attachment/pdf/3927862/SGDP_Presentation_Feb_2026.pdf

limited in both time and space. Metrolink lacks fare parity or free transfers with other services, each of which uses a different payment system, with local transit in LA County using TAP, Orange County using WAVE, San Diego County using Pronto, while Metrolink, Surfliner, and other county bus systems accept none of these. This lack of common fare payment systems is emblematic of broader coordination issues and makes transit confusing and overly costly for potential new riders. By contrast, dozens of agencies across nine counties in the Bay Area use the same transit card, with discounted transfers across services. Lack of schedule coordination across counties is also an issue, with poorly aligned schedules for transfers between Metrolink, Surfliner, and Coaster in particular posing an obstacle to travel between Riverside and San Diego Counties.

Regional rail agencies also face more imminent crises. As of early June 2026, Metrolink was facing a $35M budget deficit that has led to the agency proposing devastating 40% service cuts. This crisis is directly related to the agency's fragile and problematic governance, with arbitrary budget cuts by Los Angeles and Orange Counties driving about ⅓ of the deficit. The Coaster is facing similar fiscal challenges in the future, driven by national trends in lower farebox recovery and inflation that strain budgets. Multiple agencies are also struggling with equipment issues, with Metrolink having to cut 20% of service in 2026 due to a flaw across their new Tier 4 F125 locomotives, and Sprinter needing to replace their fleet fifteen years early.[6] Across the LOSSAN corridor, agencies are failing to maintain basic service and reliability - let alone deliver the service expansions needed to meet California's climate and affordability goals.

Recognizing these challenges, the California Senate launched the LOSSAN Rail Corridor Resiliency Subcommittee and passed SB 1098 to find a solution. SB 1098 calls on the state to deliver a report with actionable political solutions for the legislature. But few solutions are to be found in the public comment draft.

2. Why the SB 1098 Working Group and Draft Report fall short

2A. Failure of CalSTA to Provide Transparent, Open Meetings

The text of SB 1098 (14072.6. (b)) calls on CalSTA to convene a working group to deliver a report by February 1st, 2026. In addition to the various LOSSAN operators and right of way owners, the text of the legislation explicitly calls for the inclusion of "Business, community, transportation, environmental, labor, and civic organizations" in the working group. Contrary to the law, the working group was convened for the first time on February 19th, 2026 - after the

6 https://www.transittalent.com/articles/index.cfm?story=NCTD_Needs_To_Replace_Sprinter_Fleet_Early_3-2-2025

deadline for the report. Attendees included only Caltrans Division of Rail, Ventura CTC, LA Metro, FTA, SBCAG, OCTA, SANDAG, NCTD, LOSSAN, Metrolink, RCTC, and Senate Staff[7], excluding advocates as well as the Coastal Commission.[8] No public information is available about the participants of the subsequent March and April meetings.

Not only were civic organizations excluded from membership in the working group, the public was excluded altogether, in likely violation of the Bagley-Keene Act. Californians for Electric Rail reached out to CalSTA staff about public access to the March and April meetings, but did not receive a timely response, and agendas and locations for both meetings were not posted until a week after the meetings occurred, excluding any public oversight. Meeting notes from these meetings merely summarize what was discussed without attribution, providing no information about the process or political dynamics. The May 11th meeting was open to the public, but consisted of CalSTA staff discussing an already-settled report outline, with seemingly little opportunity to alter the outcome nor light shed upon the decision-making process.

The short timeline and limited participation limit the scope and ambition of the report. There appears to have been no discussion of international or domestic best practices, and the report lacks technical rigor, driven by a lack of participation from engineering and management experts in the private sector or academia. There is no consideration given to the needs or perspectives of rail riders or workers. Instead, report recommendations are based on the consensus of the very entities who have failed to come to a consensus on basic service and operational issues for decades. Unsurprisingly, the recommendations fall short of the bold solutions needed to resolve the crisis.

It should come as no surprise that this working group came to little consensus on transformative solutions. LOSSAN is in crisis because of a governance structure heavily dependent on voluntary cooperation and consensus that is falling apart. Currently, OCTA leadership thinks that Metrolink is running too many trains[9] and is pushing to cut Metrolink funding by 10% to induce service cuts. This is at odds with the State Rail Plan, Metrolink's service planning and their $10B SCORE capital program, and the SB 1098 mandate to increase service, but also at odds with inland counties, who have expressed interest in increased service but depend on OCTA's cooperation. Entities who cannot agree on whether to run more service in line with established plans cannot be expected to come to consensus on more substantive and transformational reforms that might undercut their own power. The desire for maximal consensus is crippling the ability of LOSSAN and Metrolink to rationally plan and improve rider experience.

2B. How the Flawed Process Produced Tepid Findings

[7] https://calsta.ca.gov/-/media/calsta-media/documents/lossan_wg_notes_feb2026-a11y.pdf

[8] A Coastal Commission representative claimed at the May 11th meeting that they had been included in subsequent meetings, though this is not verifiable as notes or a recording from the May meeting have not been made public.

[9] https://www.sbsun.com/2026/05/15/ridership-drop-service-cuts-plague-metrolink-as-it-struggles-to-define-its-future/?share=02sgwrtorcotclieonou

Due to the flawed process, the LOSSAN working group draft report falls short of the crisis at hand.

SB 1098 calls on the report to discuss “Alternative management and operations models or structures that improve intercity and regional rail services.“ Yet the draft policy recommendations in area B provide no alternative management and operations models or structures. Instead, it explicitly recommends a continuation of the status quo: “use existing avenues to formalize this coordination” (B3.1.1.1). The mild recommendation that agencies align schedule changes on the same date (B3.1.2.1) explicitly states that it is not an “inflexible mandate” and thus can be ignored by agencies at their leisure. These recommendations also fall short of SB 1098’s mandate to “improve rail service coordination” by failing to set goals for fare and schedule coordination.

The recommendation to identify a primary freight railroad liaison (B3.1.3.1) is a good start, but the lack of urgency and adherence to the law seen throughout this process leaves open the question of whether such a liaison will actually be identified, and whether they will communicate effectively with relevant agencies. Ideally, a report generated under more inclusive and less rushed circumstances would have identified a specific freight liaison and recommended a process to ensure coordination.

Similarly, SB 1098 includes “Changes to state statutes, rules, or ***funding*** necessary to improve the quality, performance, usage, management, or frequency of passenger rail services with a focus on streamlining, clarifying, and improving existing processes or procedures.“ While the draft report acknowledges funding challenges, Area C (Section 4.0) contains no recommendations for new sources of state funding, despite the urgent need for more operations funding to fulfill state and local service goals. California underfunds transit operations compared to other states.[10]

Likewise, the report’s recommendations around changing the amount or structure of capital funding are weak, despite the urgent need to invest in coastal resiliency and lackluster results for the last ten years of capital investment. The recommendations assume the continued existence of TIRCP and other state grant programs - despite recent modifications to the Cap and Invest market mechanisms that essentially defund TIRCP, LCTOP, and other greenhouse gas reduction fund transit programs.

Recommendation A2.1.2.1 would negatively impact already oversubscribed competitive grant programs by expanding them from new capital projects to state of good repair. Making basic maintenance subject to the delays and scrutiny of competitive grant programs is not best practice; formula funding is. Similarly, recommendation A4 to prioritize projects with local funding encourages overly complex patchwork funding that inflates project budgets and timelines.

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https://www.seamlessbayarea.org/blog/2025/12/30/state-task-force-issues-report-setting-stage-for-progress-on-funding-coordination-capital-reforms

Recommendation A2.3.1.2 would task member agencies with compiling a list of grade crossing locations prioritized by risk to guide investment. This is duplicative of work already done by CPUC under PUC Code section 190. It also doesn't address the core reasons grade separations are challenging: 1) grade separation projects are planned as one-offs, instead of as corridors; 2) grade separation projects are designed and led by local governments that lack standards or capacities to deliver them cost effectively; 3) annual state investment in the Section 190 Program has not grown with inflation for at least forty years.

In addition to weak policy and governance recommendations, the report also lacks specificity on strategies to accelerate capital investments that could "reduce disruptions or delays" and improve the frequency and performance of rail. Overhead electrification would increase rail speed and frequency and reduce equipment-related delays associated with complex diesel engines, yet commitment to electrification remains lacking both in general and in the draft report. Capacity projects such as the Serra Siding are essential to service goals elaborated in SCORE and the LOSSAN optimization plan, yet this report fails to address political, governance, or technical barriers to their completion. Finally, while the report includes some recommendations around emergency repairs, the report fails to propose strategies to accelerate the construction of the Del Mar and San Clemente bypasses.

3. Rail Advocate Recommendations

3A. Need for Governance Reform and a Stronger Organizational Form

Governance reform for the LOSSAN corridor is necessary to overcome structural issues that prevent necessary improvements to transit and rail service between Los Angeles and San Diego.

Rail transit in Southern California is currently split between several different agencies, as is the responsibility and ownership between them over right-of-way and tracks. The consequence has been the division of resources, the creation of redundant administrative and bureaucratic organization, as well as a lack of coordination on equipment, scheduling and improvements to service.

The recommendation that Californians for Electric Rail presents is a merger of the different authorities that have governance over rail infrastructure in Southern California into a single entity which is empowered to provide regional public transit service by rail, and road (e.g. regional express buses). This recommendation is not without historic precedent, would follow best practices as set by other agencies in the United States, and would also be in the best interest of county transportation commissions across the Southern California region, including Greater Los Angeles, and San Diego Counties.

Current governance over rail resources splits responsibilities between individual county transportation commissions. This is a historic system that was instituted by California Assembly Bill 1246, passed in 1975 which created county transportation commissions. While AB1246 was intended to resolve perceived issues over regional transit service provided in Southern California by the SCRTD, the bill has had more detriments than benefits.

The current governance structure with LOSSAN inheriting a devolved service from Caltrans Division of Rail stems from efforts in the 1990s. In the wake of the failure of state intercity rail bonds in 1994, SB 457 was passed in 1996 to allow devolution of intercity rail to joint powers agencies. Southern California explored but could not move forward on this project due to disagreement between counties on how such an agency would be governed and managed. In 2012 a bill forcing the devolution of the Surfliner down to LOSSAN was introduced. At the time. opponents there were prescient warnings[11] that:

1. The Department of Finance predicted that this would worsen coordination with intercity buses and rail service as well as local transit;
2. The local government-led JPA would not improve efficiency of administrative, operational, planning or capital project delivery; and
3. The local government JPA could not agree on basic governance questions itself.

Fourteen years later, it's clear that the opponents were largely correct.

Currently, county transportation commissions are trapped in an adversarial relationship, competing with one another for state grants and resources that instead could be pooled in a regional authority that benefits the whole region. Commuters who commute from one county from another, for example from Riverside to San Diego County, or from San Bernardino County to Los Angeles County, are forced to either commute by car, or are reliant upon two different county transportation commissions which may have conflicting goals or ideas and which inhibit important intermodal connections for commuters.

Current legislation and governance also mean that many commission board members hold office by virtue of ex-officio status, holding their position within transportation commissions because of another office that they may hold. This requires them to split their time and responsibility and prevents them from focusing full-time on the demands of transit planning. Such members may or may not be experts in transportation, engineering, or other disciplines relevant to the oversight of a major railroad. This is neither a reasonable nor sustainable expectation for such officials.

The effect is a flawed process of governance that is inherently unrepresentative of California's transit needs and at worst even potentially undemocratic. Residents in Riverside County may work in Orange or Los Angeles County, and the economies of these counties are interdependent on one another, but do not have representation or say in the transit policies of these areas. This is a relatively recent aberration, with transit in Southern California historically being a shared resource. The effect of transportation commissions has effectively created a

[11] https://la.streetsblog.org/gabbard-history-of-the-surfliner-lossan-and-a-look-at-pending-legislation

much more confusing and difficult landscape for residents of Southern California to understand, and has not meaningfully improved the transit situation since the 1970s when they were created. **This is not a fault of the commissions, but is a structural consequence of the legislation that created them, and must be corrected through governance reform.**

A regional governing body created by state enabling legislation would resolve these problematic relations, free up additional resources for county commissions and enable greater coordination of resources and greater efficiencies for public transportation as a whole. Several other transit agencies throughout the country operate under these principles. The Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority and New York Metropolitan Transit Authority both operate as regionally empowered authorities that are responsible for governing transportation resources and planning across the greater New York and Boston-Providence areas. Chicago has passed legislation that will reorganize the different transit modalities in the greater Chicagoland area under one agency and California should do the same.

The historic SCRTD which was effectively dismantled by AB 1246 was approaching this by the mid 1970s before the creation of the new commissions prevented this. A lack of funding, as well as a hostile public due to historic baggage inherited by the agency prevented what could have been a leader in American public transportation. The SCRTD shows that there is historic precedent for the state legislature to pass legislation that reorganizes regional transit within Southern California and offers perspectives why such possibilities exist, but are also necessary.

The benefits of such consolidation would be to reduce the overlapping and redundant forms of bureaucratic administration over transit, to pool resources and funding, to create a greater collection of engineering talent and reduce friction between counties while also freeing up additional resources for the existing commissions to focus on local needs, while also coordinating with the regional picture. Studies of transit planning, including those by the New York University Marron Institute of Public Policy[12] and the University of California[13], have consistently shown that public transit projects are cheaper and become cheaper the longer such pools of talent and institutional knowledge exist, eliminating reliance on consulting, and creating experience that translates to smoother delivery on future projects. A larger regional authority would also have greater powers and authorities to negotiate rates, and have a stronger bargaining position with equipment manufacturers, builders of rolling stock and bus fleets and would eliminate costly incompatibilities between different fuel and electrical charging equipment. Currently, different commissions are exploring electric, and hydrogen options that are incompatible with one another, making transportation costs higher overall for the whole of Southern California.

A regional authority would still represent the counties. Rather than the counties represented by their own transportation commissions, they would instead have representation in the new, shared regional authority with full time board members appointed by the Governor or Legislative leadership for their expertise and competency in public transit planning and execution. This model would be similar to the model employed by the New York MTA, which

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[12] New York Marron Institute, *Transit Costs Project,* New York University, 2025

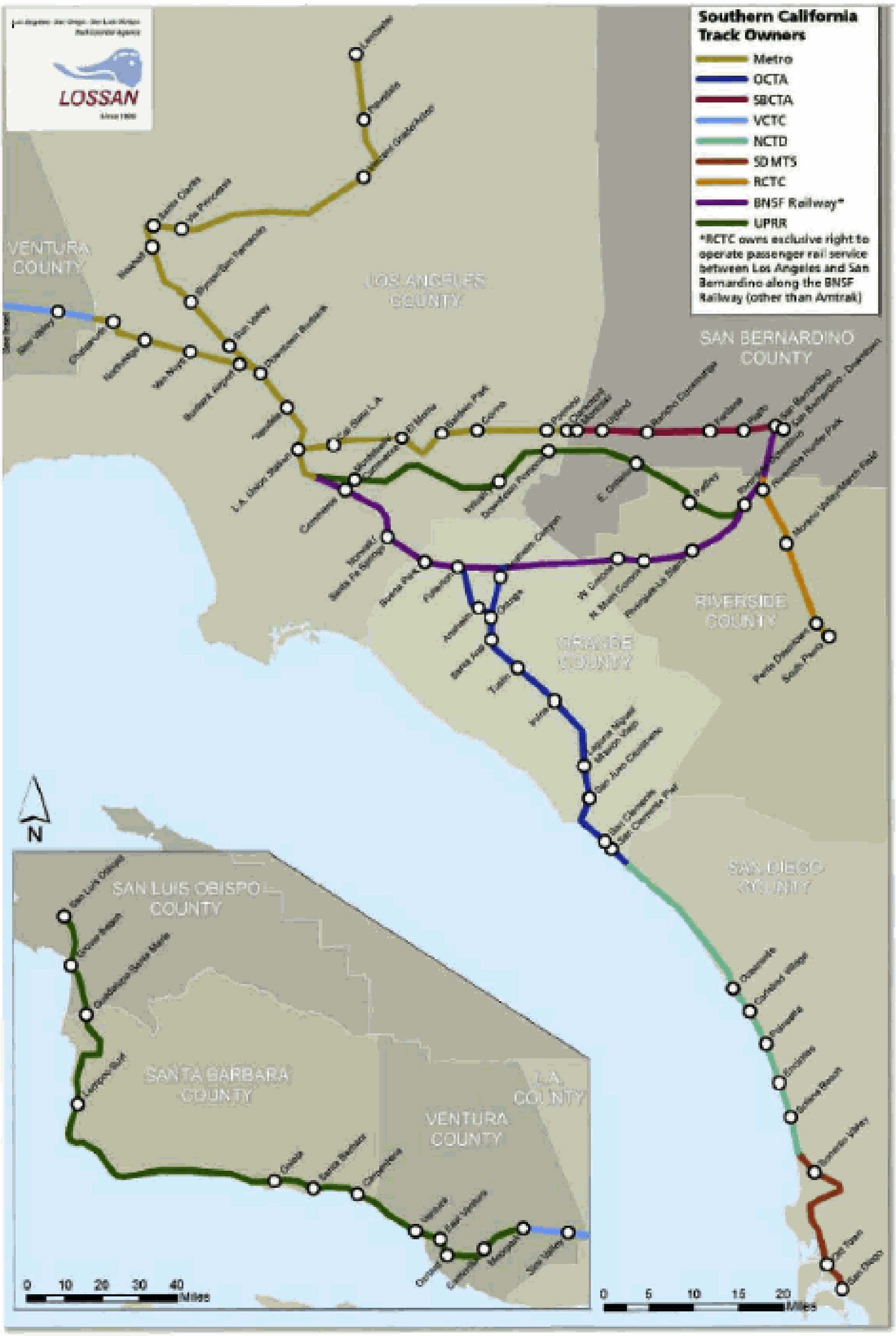
[13]Ethan Elkind, Katie Segal, Ted Lamm, et al. “How can California Transit Agencies Build Rail Cheaper and Faster?” UC Institute of Transportation Studies. Dec. 2021.

appoints its members through the governor, at the recommendation of the counties (or boroughs in the case of New York City) that it provides service to. Such board members would be the members for their counties, would be clearly identifiable and have clear responsibilities making them more accountable and ensuring that there is a democratic representation in public transport.

3B. Need for a Single Infrastructure Manager

Best practice calls for network management of rail assets. Ownership of mainline rail tracks used by passenger trains in Southern California is split between nine different entities, both private and public, as shown on the map below.[14] These different entities each have conflicting needs, demands, and requirements of their track and these may not be compatible with one another.

[14] The LOSSAN corridor's track has seven (7) owners (from north to south): UP, VCTC, LA Metro, BNSF, OCTA, NCTD and SDMTS. Metrolink member agencies SBCTA and RCTC also own track, but not directly on the LOSSAN corridor. The cities of Los Angeles and Long Beach also own the Alameda Corridor and tracks in the port areas, which are only used by freight trains


LOSSAN
Southern California Track Owners
Metro
OCTA
SBCTA
VCTC
NCTD
SD MTS
RCTC
BNSF Railway*
UPRR
*RCTC owns exclusive right to operate passenger rail service between Los Angeles and San Bernardino along the BNSF Railway (other than Amtrak)
VENTURA COUNTY
LOS ANGELES COUNTY
SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY
RIVERSIDE COUNTY
ORANGE COUNTY
SAN DIEGO COUNTY
SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY
SANTA BARBARA COUNTY
VENTURA COUNTY
L.A. COUNTY
N
0 10 20 30 40 Miles
0 5 10 15 20 Miles

San Diego's North County Transit District (NCTD) has been gradually making improvements along its portion of the LOSSAN Surfline corridor, Santa Fe's historic track between Los Angeles and San Diego in order to improve service for the Pacific Surfliner and the NCTD Coaster Commuter. However, such improvements will never be able to meet their full potential without matching improvements to track in Orange County which has not manifested along track owned by OCTA. This has also prevented expansion to Metrolink's IE-OC line, which connects Riverside and San Bernardino Counties with Orange County, despite both counties expressing demand.

A regional rail authority, potentially acting as a single infrastructure manager, would be able to build necessary infrastructure improvements and renewals without being subject to county control over funding. A regional rail authority would also be able to make necessary infrastructure improvements to the greater betterment of the entire region without being subject to inter-county political friction that currently impedes such necessities.

Such an authority would also be able to construct new rights-of-way that improve transit for residents in different counties that would otherwise not be possible under a single transportation commission. San Bernardino and Riverside county have for example considered restoring the former right of way of the California Southern to provide rail service through the Temecula Valley to East San Diego County, a path also under consideration by the California High-Speed Rail Authority, but this is not possible without the power and funding a regional agency could provide. Similarly, the RCTC has expressed an admirable and ambitious goal to provide rail to the Coachella Valley, but has struggled to achieve much because of the difficulties required to make such a goal feasible. Ventura County has wanted to extend Metrolink service through Filmore along the Filmore and Western track that it owns, but is also similarly limited by the resources it has available.

Such ambitious projects, necessary for the continued growth and economic sustainability of Southern California are only possible through the scales enabled by a powerful regional authority, created for the betterment of not just a single county, but several counties.

County transit commissions disproportionately spend their resources on freeway maintenance and infrastructure. In the long term these projects are more, not less expensive than public transit. By investing so heavily in freeways the transit costs of Southern California are higher than they potentially could be with better public transit alternatives. The effect of over-investment in freeway and road infrastructure is that the state has effectively offloaded many of the costs of commuting to individual residents who have to shoulder more of the burdens of transportation.

Creating a new regional authority **purpose created and tailored for regional public transit needs** will allow local commissions to have more money for important local projects, while also giving them greater ability to coordinate and provide options for commuters. This new regional authority can take the responsibility of rail, and regional transit assets, including buses, facilities, etc and pool more expertise for better use. Having an existing pool of intercity buses will facilitate the routine provision of bus bridges when service disruptions do occur.

Challenges to operational integration

We recognize that this proposed major reorganization will not be without challenges. The SB 1098 working group's inability to achieve consensus for meaningful reforms is testament to the difficulties with coordination. Proposed reforms will require changes to local statutes and agency practices requiring approval from multiple boards in addition to state legislation. This will require continued engagement from CalSTA and state legislatures to provide follow-through. Local advocates have an important role to play in creating political support for reforms - another reason why their exclusion from the SB 1098 working group was unwise.

In particular, Metrolink's primary source of operations funding is local sales taxes (as seen in hte table below), whose rates and allocations vary and are ultimately controlled by local county transportation commissions. Metrolink's current funding crisis seems to be driven in part by a desire by counties for additional control and oversight over spending. Control over a new source of regional and/or state funding is an essential power for the new proposed board, but that raises the question of what to do with existing revenue measures. We suggest that once a new revenue source is available, that counties transfer funding currently dedicated to regional rail to local transit using processes and latitude stipulated in existing measures. The State Legislature is empowered, and has previously, given tax-setting authorities to regional institutions for the benefit of a larger area. One example is the historic SCRTD itself, which had tax and tariff powers given to it that could be levied across the Greater Los Angeles area.

County/Measure	Sunset date	Rate	FY25-26 annual revenue	Allocation
Riverside County Measure A	2039 (up for renewal 2026)	½ ¢	$262 M	12% for transit* 5% for Metrolink
San Bernardino County Measure I	2040 (up for renewal 2026)	½ ¢	$265 M	18% for transit* 8% for Metrolink
Orange County Measure M2	2041	½ ¢	$432.1 M	25% for transit
Los Angeles County Measure R	2039	½ ¢	$1070 M	65% for transit 3% to Metrolink capital**
Los Angeles County Measure M	none	½ ¢	$1156 M	81% for transit 1% to Metrolink**
Ventura	n/a	0 ¢	0	n/a

County - nothing				
San Diego County TransNet	2048	½ ¢ (gas only)		33% for transit 0% for Metrolink 2.5% for Coaster operations

* Specific to western sub-regions with rail service.
** Contribution legally specified in expenditure plan

We recognize that many agencies and local electeds prioritize local control, and may oppose these proposed changes on the grounds that they will reduce their power. Local control is often defended on the basis of enhancing public participation, local knowledge, and democratic engagement - all very important values. However, the current system fails to meaningfully enable these principles, while also failing to deliver the transformative service and ridership growth the region needs. Under the status quo of part time governance by local electeds, boards defer decision-making to unelected and frequently anonymous staff, reducing transparency and public input.

Meanwhile, allowing individual counties effective veto power over service improvements is undemocratic and a barrier to public participation by riders outside those counties, who have no representation on other county boards. The overly complex current structure avoids accountability and leaves the public in the dark as to who to contact about key decisions. Under the current Metrolink JPA, the voting structure and lack of minimum funding contributions give disproportionate “veto” power. Consensus is not structured as an agreement of compromises, but a requirement for unanimous consensus of different counties on local, rather than regional needs. Our proposed board structure maintains local representation, while balancing this with statewide needs.

The proposed structure also has many benefits for counties. County transportation departments will no longer be tasked with managing complex capital projects that they have neither the expertise nor interest in managing, and instead can focus on efforts where their local knowledge has the most impact: service planning. Some local stakeholders, such as Orange County Supervisor and OCTA board member Don Wagner, have expressed a desire to reduce their involvement in managing Metrolink, and these wishes will be granted. Counties that want service improvements, meanwhile, will no longer have to deal with frustrating bilateral agreements with multiple actors in which they are often the weakest party[15] - they will instead have a powerful agency they can partner with to advance their priorities and exert real leverage over freight railroads. Local electeds who show leadership in championing a new, more effective governance structure will leave a legacy of successfully delivering transit enhancements that improve the lives of their constituents.

[15] For instance, Riverside County has expressed a desire for more service on the IE-OC and 91 Lines. This has been thwarted by the need for cooperation with Orange County, who want less service, and BNSF, who own a significant share of the right of way and are considerably more powerful than any county. Of the three, Riverside County has the least leverage and has been unable to deliver service.

3C. Need for Dedicated Funding Sources for Regional Rail Operations

Successful regional rail networks have dedicated and stable revenue sources in addition to the fare box and ancillary revenues like TOD and retail rents. Long-term the goal of systems should strive to improve service quality (frequency, speed, comfort, reliability) and operational efficiency to the point that the farebox covers a higher share of the operating costs. With the exception of regional rail lines in Japan, Hong Kong and South Korea that fully cover their costs, regional rail lines in the developed world typically have a farebox recovery ratio between 40-60%. Ample evidence from passenger rail operations around the world has shown that more frequent, faster and more reliable service significantly increases the farebox recovery ratio.

Successful regional rail networks have stable operational funding - typically funded by tax revenues from the regional or sub-national level. Operators grow the ridership and farebox revenue by running quality service, attracting more riders per operating hour and investing in capital projects that improves service quality or adds new markets.

Surfliner, Coaster and Metrolink, by contrast, largely do not control their own funding. In recent years, these services have relied on one-time state funds to sustain operations, but these funding sources have now ended. Metrolink relies on separate approvals from five member counties to fund most of its operations, and does not maintain reserves, returning surpluses to counties. Currently, disagreements between counties on whether to prioritize service improvements have led to about ⅓ of Metrolink's deficit. This uncertainty makes it harder for planners to optimize existing services and plan effectively for capital improvements that improve service.

Metrolink funded a student adventure pass to lower fares for students. This was funded by a state grant. It resulted in increased ridership. When the grant ended, Metrolink member counties declined to provide additional funding to support the extension of the program.

As an example, recently Metrolink abandoned plans to install WiFi on its trains - a perk valued by riders and standard practice for regional rail domestically - because member counties did not agree to the increased costs.

Providing a stable funding source also allows for the equipment and infrastructure that Surfliner, Coaster and Metrolink services rely on to be more efficiently maintained and repaired as necessary. Currently the annual budget contributions towards Metrolink make it difficult for proactive repair and procurement of new, modern rolling stock. On the infrastructure side, the wide divergences in county ROW maintenance and state of good repair regimes is driven by the different funding sources. If one county along the Surfliner route does an excellent job maintaining their infrastructure but the adjacent county has been underfunding maintenance, the slowness and capacity constraints impact all riders.

The SB 1098 WG materials indicate that invited stakeholders identified the problem with inadequate state of good repair funding. Instead of pressing for dedicated revenue, they proposed to expand TIRCP competitive, discretionary grant eligibility to make state of good repair eligible. This is not consistent with global best practice - which funds renewals consistently and on multi-year frameworks. Discretionary grants for state of good repair funding would likely further degrade system-wide infrastructure conditions while occasionally helping a select number of projects. Funding critical maintenance activities like repairing bridges and replacing railroad ties should not be at the whims of discretionary grant selection.

CER recommends that a dedicated, stable revenue source be provided to regional and intercity rail in Southern California.

3D. More Effective Capital Funding

In order to meet the ambitious service and electrification goals in the State Rail Plan 2050, California will need to seriously re-think how funding for capital investments is allocated. High-frequency intercity and regional rail service will require more resources but also more stable and predictable investment.

To this end, Californians for Electric Rail has published the policy brief *Against Patchwork Funding: How Multi-Year Investment Frameworks Can Deliver Rail Infrastructure Cheaper and Faster*.[16]

Against Patchwork Funding discusses the status quo for rail funding in California, best practices in low and medium cost countries and ways California could re-orient its funding practices to better implement the State Rail Plan, the LOSSAN Optimization Plan, SCORE, and San Diego Double Tracking and Rail Re-Alignment.

In brief, California's current funding program environment is highly unstable and discretionary. Unlike highway funding, there is no guaranteed funding for design and engineering for intercity and regional rail service and infrastructure development. As a consequence, many project sponsors must patch together funding for design over many years. This delay in funding pushes out final project design and capital construction for years. It also encourages project sponsors to apply for and win construction funds at conceptual design when project scope is not fully defined – which provides third parties with leverage to demand costly design changes and often results in much higher costs as design is completed.

Similarly California does not guarantee capital funding for intercity and regional rail projects – even if they are identified in the State Rail Plan. Intercity and regional rail projects must compete against a variety of other projects such as rolling stock, renewals, EV charging at stations, mobility hubs and the like through competitive, discretionary grant programs like TIRCP. In order to meet all these demands for discretionary construction dollars, funding agencies make partial

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https://calelectricrail.org/against-patchwork-funding-how-multi-year-investment-frameworks-can-deliver-rail-faster-and-cheaper/

awards. These partial awards force project sponsors to fill remaining gaps with further competitive grant programs – which further pushes out full funding and construction.

Low and medium cost countries handle investment in their rail networks in a different way – more akin to the stability associated with highway programs. First, design is fully-funded through state engineering departments or publicly-owned engineering firms. Second, awards for construction funding aren't committed until designs are near or fully complete. Third, construction funding is planned, tracked, evaluated and granted through 4-6 year investment frameworks. These frameworks provide a stable and transparent pipeline for both project sponsors and funders. Project sponsors know exactly how and when they can be expected to receive full funding. Funders have clear visibility on how projects are being developed and can provide early feedback to manage scope, costs, schedule and risks. Fourth and finally, multi-year investment frameworks provide full construction funding awards for projects.

CER recommends that the State of California adopt multi-year investment frameworks for regional and intercity rail to support improved service for Southern California.

3E. Aligning MPO Planning and Regional Investment

The Legislature and Administration should require serviced-led planning across county and metropolitan planning organization boundaries to encourage the planning and delivery of regional and intercity rail networks.

The LOSSAN corridor runs through region five distinct Metropolitan Planning Organizations. Each Metropolitan Planning Organization in turn is composed of counties and cities. In theory, these disparate units could prioritize intercity and regional rail as part of the Regional Transportation Plan and State Transportation Improvement Program. In reality local governments tend to support projects with local benefits rather than regional or state benefits.

That means projects that typically make into regional plans are collated local priorities and do not correspond to a larger transportation network. As an example, a project to extend a light rail line will be prioritized over improving the existing commuter rail through double tracking and electrification. We see similar disagreements between local interests over rolling stock. Lancaster - home of a hydrogen industry - naturally supports hydrogen trains. Its neighbor Palmdale - slated for electric high-speed rail - is more open to electric rail. But this division creates paralysis in rolling stock selection and purchase.

Regional planning as it currently exists fails to coordinate service. The Surfliner and Metrolink have recently moved to clock face schedules. This is a global best practice where trains depart at the same minute after the hour at a station throughout the day. It makes scheduling, maintenance, operations, transfers and customer utility much better. Nonetheless, we have not seen coordination between Metrolink and Coaster at Oceanside to facilitate transfers using this clock face schedule. Neither in Southern California have we seen local transit operators work - like they have in the Bay Area with clock faced BART, Caltrain and Capitol Corridor - to sync schedules between connecting buses, light rail and ferries with regional rail. Fares have not been integrated between local transit and regional/intercity rail except in a vast quilt of ad hoc arrangements.

Regional planning must be updated to account for intercity and regional rail as well as service coordination and integration. The SB1098 Working Group report makes some recommendations to this end. These include updating guidance and requirements for regional planning to better account for intercity rail. These proposals are helpful but insufficient.

First, any updates to regional planning must include regional rail as well as intercity rail. Consistently local governments acting through Metropolitans Planning Organizations have de-prioritized regional rail projects - especially in Southern California where regional rail crosses county or Metropolitan Planning Organization lines.

Second, regional planning updates should require that local transit and other transportation investments be planned using service-led planning. Currently the State Rail Plan uses service-led planning as a global best planning practice. Rather than starting with a specific technology or infrastructure, service-led planning starts from assessing travel demand and designing a transport network vision that addresses that demand. Only once service concepts from that transport network vision are developed are capital projects like rolling stock and infrastructure.

Unless local transit and transport planning is integrated with service-led planning, intercity and regional rail will continue to be siloed for regional planning and investment. Local governments will continue to focus on delivering discrete bits of infrastructure rather than developing and delivering a transit network.

Third, state and regional funding need to be tied to service-led planning and state rail plan integration.

3F. Need for State Capacity to Support Service and Project Development

The LOSSAN Optimization Plan and SCORE Program envision decades of incremental upgrades to capacity to provide frequent and reliable service for intercity and regional rail riders. Instead of investing in public sector planners, designs, engineers and project managers to do this work, the de facto policy of California has been for every operator or ROW owner to develop these projects within their own silos. These operators or ROW owners do not have the capacity or work flow to retain public sector capacity for rail service improvements on their own payrolls. Inevitably they turn to private consultants to manage programs and projects.

While consultants can be useful, research into transit and infrastructure costs has consistently shown that American and Californians rely too often on consultants to perform core functions that better lay with the public sector. Yale Law School's Zach Liscow has produced a paper showing that experienced engineers save significant time and money for infrastructure projects relative to consultants.[17]

The lack of state capacity to plan, design and deliver projects is downstream of the lack of consistent funding for transit and rail. Caltrans uses stable contract authority funding from the Federal government to fund state capacity. Until recently, transit and rail have not had similar mechanisms to retain talented workers for the public sector.

Under the Corridor ID program for intercity rail projects proceeding through process receive resources to progressively plan and develop projects. California has seven total Corridor ID projects. Ideally, California would have public sector staff developing projects under Corridor ID at different stages. Instead each operator or ROW owner is independently pursuing the planning and development work through their own consultants.

This is the case with Coachella Valley Rail, which is pursuing a two round trips a day service development plan. RCTC as project owner has already spent six years on a consultant produced service concept and programmatic environmental impact report. In early 2026 RCTC procured a very high priced program management consultant contract with the same consultant. Even worse, that consultant is projecting that simply getting to 30% design will take seven more years.[18]

This means that California is not only paying higher prices for consultants to perform work, it is losing out on opportunities to develop and retain knowledge, standards, policies, processes and interfaces. A retained consultant designer working with Union Pacific must re-learn UP's processes and requirements each time. They will also be hesitant to escalate issues early so that phone call problems do not become infrastructure problems.

An empowered Caltrans Rail office - funded using Corridor ID or state funding - could effectively work with operators to develop service concepts that meet State Rail Plan goals. Those service concepts could be implemented through organizational coordination and integration. To the extent additional infrastructure is needed, the Caltrans Rail design and engineering section could develop clear standards for working with Host Railroads on capacity constraints and solutions. It could develop processes for identifying and relocating utilities. And it could draw on Caltrans' existing procurement and project management capabilities to deliver infrastructure for operators.

We didn't rely on California local governments to plan, design and deliver the State Highway System using private consultants. We tasked a state engineering body with that work. We should use that model to help plan and deliver the intercity and regional rail network.

3G. Prioritizing LOSSAN Electrification

[17] https://ssrn.com/abstract=5045644
[18] https://calelectricrail.org/state-capacity-for-better-projects-coachella-valley-rail-case-study/

In 2025 CER published *Electrolink: Modern Passenger Rail Service for Southern California.*[19] This vision, drawing on work from NYU Transit Costs Project, shows how modernization of the Southern California passenger rail unlocks metropolitan mobility in ways competitive with car travel. By way of history, in 1993 Metrolink studied electrification, but member counties failed to reach the necessary consensus to advance planning. In 2016 Metrolink again considered electrification[20] as preparation for the 2028 Olympics but again failed to reach consensus necessary to advance planning.

In 2024 Caltrain inaugurated its 51 mile electrified service that reduced scheduled trip times by 30% and allowed for more off-peak service. Caltrain has seen significant increases in ridership recovery since that time. Metrolink and LOSSAN have been paralyzed in terms of modernized rolling stock and infrastructure due to their emphasis on consensus-based decision making.

Using the acceleration and speed benefits of electrification, the reduced dwell time of level boarding and through running service at Los Angeles Union Station and the San Diego Santa Fe Depot, Electrolink demonstrates how regional rail trip times can be reduced to levels equal or faster than driving. For example, these improvements would reduce travel times 20% between Santa Clarita and Downtown LA from 1hr10m to 57m, and between Oceanside and Downtown San Diego from 1hr1m to 45m. Critically, these interventions are much more affordable and less disruptive than efforts to increase top speeds for trains.

Under the State Rail Plan, an electrified spine traveling from downtown San Francisco to the Central Valley, San Fernando Valley, Downtown Los Angeles and Anaheim is the center piece of the 2050 California rail network. Conspicuously missing is electrified service south of Anaheim to San Diego. This despite the Surfliner and Orange County lines demonstrating strong ridership - with the former the 3rd most trafficked intercity rail route in the country.

There is a clear business case for electrified infrastructure south of Anaheim based on the potential to improve Surfliner, Orange County and Coaster service trip times and lower operating costs relative to diesel. In addition, it could allow for an extension of future high-speed rail service to southern Orange County and San Diego. Nonetheless Caltrans, OCTA, SANDAG and others have been non-committal or resistant to identifying electrification as even a long-term goal. In any other developed country the Surfliner route would have been electrified 40 years ago.

CER recommends that electrification of the infrastructure south of Anaheim to San Diego be added to the State Rail Plan to improve service for regional and intercity rail.

4. Conclusion: A Call for Structural Reform and Real Investment

[19] https://calelectricrail.org/electrolink-modern-passenger-rail-service-for-southern-california/

[20] https://la.urbanize.city/post/metrolink-awarded-65-million-grant-begin-study-capital-improvements-program

SB 1098, as originally envisioned by Senator Catherine Blakespear, sought to seriously examine the problems facing intercity and regional rail service in Southern California in partnership with operators, local governments and the public.

Unfortunately the process was late, opaque, inadequate and overly solicitous to consensus rather than addressing existential challenges to passenger rail service. The report reflects this process. Its recommendations - while helpful in some instances - do not meet the moment.

Surfliner service is frequently canceled or slowed due to coastal erosion. Service is cancelled without notice or bus bridges to riders. Local governments refuse to work in concert to prioritize service improvements, coordination or capital projects that improve the experience for riders up and down the corridor. Funders are cutting operating budgets based on misinformation or parochial concerns. Governance is not responsive to riders or the public writ large for better and more flexible service. Intercity and regional rail service is largely uncoordinated and unintegrated with local transit in terms of schedules, fares and routes. Staff is handicapped by their inability to plan long-term, achieve operational cost savings or coordinate phased service improvements. Local government ROW or track rights owners negotiate as silos with some of the largest and most unresponsive firms in America over track renewal, improvements and scheduling. Sensible service improvements like electrification south of Anaheim are omitted from the State Rail Plan due to misunderstandings and fear of a heckler's veto by a few actors. Shared capacity improvements like HSR LA-Anaheim, SCORE and LOSSAN Optimization are planned, environmentally reviewed, negotiated, designed, and funded as separate, siloed projects instead of as a coordinated network.

The primary question is whether the inside players in Southern California passenger rail want to actually improve the network, or simply oversee a managed decline. The former requires an honest and open discussion - which has not been forthcoming in the SB 1098 Working Group.

CER believes that such a discussion would lead to the natural conclusions:

Policy Area A: Strategies to increase rail service coordination and reduce disruptions or delays, including those caused by resiliency vulnerabilities, track closures, state of good repair, equipment, and staffing.

1. Operators and other relevant public agencies should work together to ensure that bus bridges are provided in the event of track closures, and provide excellent communication to riders to be able to plan accordingly.
2. For Del Mar and San Clemente bypass tunnels, CalSTA should:
    - Proceed expeditiously on planning and CAHSR-led environmental review
    - Fund geotechnical investigations to inform preliminary design
    - Fully fund preliminary design
    - Adopt global best practices on cross passages spacing contra NFPA 130[21]

[21] https://ifp.org/eliminate-redundant-subway-cross-passages/

3. CalSTA should facilitate intercity and regional rail ROW owners to re-orient their state of good repair programs to global best practice through ongoing asset renewal programs (rather than deferred maintenance bundled into large capital projects). ROW owners would submit a proposed asset renewal plan within a business plan. If approved, renewal plan funding would be bundled with operating assistance.
4. CalSTA and Caltrans should consider shifting equipment procurement and management into a financing-based model and away from a pure grant-based model (which is highly discretionary, subject to political winds and encourages expensive over-customization).
5. CalSTA and Caltrans should encourage greater rolling stock standardization, including through enabling expansion of the existing central rolling stock pool, or establishing a standards advisory body with participation of rolling stock manufacturers and other key industry stakeholders.
6. In order to reduce operations costs, improve reliability, and improve service, all relevant agents should prioritize overhead electrification as a mode of propulsion. Future versions of the State Rail Plan should explicitly include electrification on the LOSSAN corridor from Anaheim-San Diego. Electrification should also be factored into long range rolling stock planning and near term capacity projects.

Policy Area B: Alternative management and operations models or structures that improve intercity and regional rail services.

1. Governance of Southern California passenger rail should be modernized to reflect the current needs around coordination, resilience, phased service delivery, sustainable operations, and cost effective capital planning and delivery. Rail operations currently managed by Metrolink, LOSSAN, and NCTD should be consolidated into a single Southern California Rail Agency with a new governance structure. Governance modernization should include: 1) an independent board (not a JPA); 2) governance members for whom passenger rail is their primary public service role; 3) unified ROW and network management; 4) a dedicated revenue source for operations and phased capital improvements; 5) responsibility for both regional and intercity rail and bus service.

Policy Area C: Changes to state statutes, rules, or funding necessary to improve the quality, performance, usage, management, or frequency of passenger rail services, including a review of how local and regional planning agencies incorporate train service information in planning documents.

1. An ongoing source of state operations subsidy sufficient to provide service levels outlined in the state rail plan.
2. State authorization for the newly reorganized Southern California Rail Agency transit district including authorization to enact regional taxes
3. Intercity rail business plans and operating budgets should be shifted to two year periods (from current one year periods) to allow for more stable service planning and phased service improvements. Regional rail operators should also be required to submit business plans on a two year basis.

4. Caltrans should build its capacity to support service-led planning including developing clear standards, software, and resources to support regional efforts that are consistent with the state rail plan. MPOs should lead regional processes in cooperation with Caltrans to align rail operators and counties around common service goals and prioritize capital project required to deliver service concepts. Caltrans and MPOs should work with counties to enable service led-planning to be integrated into local transportation and congestion management planning.
5. Capital project state funding should be modernized to reflect global best practice of multi-year framework agreements. Projects should be prioritized based on 1) State Rail Plan conformance 2) network state readiness; 3) cost benefit score. Projects should be afforded full funding as much as possible to reduce capital stack complexity and timelines.
6. Greater coordination on schedules, routes and fares between regional and intercity rail and local transit services. Set timeline for single payment card and discounted transfers. On fare integration, CAL ITP could play a leading role in allowing Southern California riders to receive the same benefits of Clipper 2.0 in the Bay Area.

Policy Area D: Coordination of planning and project development through the federal Corridor Identification and Development Program.

1. Caltrans Division of Rail should be the primary program manager for Corridor ID activities for California - excluding California High-Speed Rail Authority.
2. Caltrans Division of Rail has already expressed intent to continue with the Corridor ID process for intercity rail irrespective of Federal continuation of that program. The Corridor ID service planning and development processes should be expanded to regional rail. Caltrans Division of Rail should offer but not require service planning and development processes to regional rail operators and ROW owners.
3. Caltrans Division of Rail should be the primary host railroad interface for regional and intercity rail operators.
4. Caltrans Division of Design, Standards Branch, should develop standard designs for capacity, level boarding, signaling, electrification, level crossing removal, and renewal projects.
5. Capital projects identified and planned in intercity or regional rail Corridor ID processes should be developed and delivered using Caltrans standard designs. Intercity rail projects should be developed and delivered by Caltrans. Regional rail capital projects should have a clear optional process for project development and delivery by Caltrans.

The Pacific Surfliner, Metrolink and Coaster have a governance structure built for the 20th century and it worked then. The local governance allowed local leaders to act expeditiously to revive passenger rail in Southern California. New regional rail service was started. Existing intercity service was extended.

But history reveals that many of the founders of Metrolink and proto-LOSSAN did not expect at the time for the siloed intercity and regional rail governance to be a long-term solution. As early as 1995 leaders in Southern California were discussing integrating intercity and regional rail into a dedicated body.[22]

In 2026 the problems are different and in some ways harder than instituting a start-up service. Climate resilience, capacity, long-term service sustainability have fewer ribbon cuttings and require more coordination and planning.

It's time for passenger rail in Southern California to take the next step to confront these challenges.

Sincerely,

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Chris Roberts
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[22] https://la.streetsblog.org/gabbard-history-of-the-surfliner-lossan-and-a-look-at-pending-legislation