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## **The California High-Speed Train Debate: The Removal of The Altamont Pass Alternative**

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### **Introduction**

It seems that it often takes depressing statistics to justify the building of new infrastructure projects in the State of California; however, there is such a wide variety of astonishing numbers that the average citizen often does not see connections among them. For instance, the number of persons fatally injured in U.S. motor vehicle crashes in the year 2000 was 41,821.<sup>1</sup> Of that number, California is responsible for 9% of those fatalities.<sup>1</sup> By the year 2020, a 63% increase in the number of passengers traveling intercity in California is projected.<sup>2</sup> Of California's 58 counties, 34 failed one or more of three clean air tests in 2004.<sup>3</sup> The top three cities in the United States that are most polluted by short-term particle pollution are all located in California.<sup>3</sup> Automobiles are responsible for 70% of ozone and particulate pollution.<sup>3</sup> It is only when all of these statistics are combined and understood that people can begin to see the correlations among vehicle fatalities, increased congestion, and deteriorating air quality.

In conjunction with California's extreme highway congestion, these statistics offer additional reasons as to why California has taken steps toward planning a state-wide, high-speed train system. In 1994, the California Intercity High-Speed Ground Transportation Commission was formed; in 1996 it issued a set of baseline recommendations for the rail network. The Commission envisioned the first phase connecting Los Angeles with the San Francisco Bay Area, and a later phase extending south to San Diego and north to Sacramento.<sup>4</sup> The California High-Speed Rail Authority (Authority) was created by the state Legislature in 1996 to develop a plan for the construction, operation and financing of a statewide, intercity high-speed passenger rail system. The Authority consists of nine members: five appointed by the Governor, two by the Senate Rules Committee, and two by the Speaker of the Assembly. All environmental, planning, and engineering work is performed by private firms under contract with the Authority.<sup>5</sup>

The California High-Speed Train Program Draft Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement (EIR/EIS) lays out plans for a high-speed railway network for intercity travel that would connect the San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento and the Central Valley, Los Angeles, and San

Diego. The California High-Speed Rail Authority is the lead agency for the requirements imposed by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Railroad Administration is the federal lead agency for the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of and need for a high-speed train system in California, as laid out in the Draft EIR/EIS, is to alleviate the pressures that an increasing population's intercity travel will put on highways, airports, buses, and conventional passenger rail infrastructure. The EIR/EIS details the projected improvements in intercity transportation due to the high-speed train system—among them, more predictable, consistent, and shorter travel times, an alternative to highway congestion, and lower emissions.<sup>2</sup>

The Draft EIR/EIS describes three alternatives: a No Project Alternative, a Modal Alternative, and a High-Speed Train Alternative. The No Project Alternative depicts the state's transportation system—highway, air, and conventional rail—as it existed in 1999-2000 and as it would be in 2020 with only the implementation of already planned transportation projects. The Modal Alternative includes a proposal for improvements to meet the increased demand in intercity travel in 2020 that would not be met in the No Project Alternative. The High-Speed Train Alternative examines various high-speed train technologies, corridors, and alignment and station options within the corridors.<sup>7</sup>

The June 2000 Final Business Plan, including plans for the construction of a state-wide high-speed rail system, was prepared for Governor Grey Davis and the California Legislature. The Business Plan explains that in the year 2020, a total of 86 weekday trains in each direction could be provided to serve the statewide intercity travel market. Sixty-four of the trains would run between northern and southern California, and the remaining 22 trains would serve shorter distance markets. There would be a total of 20 express, 12 semi-express, 20 suburban-express, 12 local, and 22 regional trains in operation.<sup>11</sup> Its timetables demonstrate that, on an express train, one could travel from San Francisco to Los Angeles in 2 ½ hours, and from Sacramento to Los Angeles in just over 2 hours.

While the Authority has laid out alternatives for various corridors within the rail system, it has stated a preferred alternative in the Draft EIR/EIS that would connect the Bay Area to the Central Valley via a route parallel to Highway 152. This choice, known as the Pacheco Pass, would include proposed station stops in Los Banos, Gilroy, and Morgan Hill. Many agencies are opposed to this route because of the growth the rail line might induce in the low-density areas. However, the California High-Speed Rail Authority claims that a rail line would instead control growth by supporting transit-oriented development. North of the planned Pacheco Pass route lies the proposed Diablo Range Direct Pass route—an alternative that environmental groups are adamantly against because it would go through Henry Coe State Park. While the Draft EIR/EIS only outlines these two corridor alternatives, the Authority's predecessor commission believed a different route paralleling Interstate 580 and going through the cities of Tracy, Livermore, and Pleasanton would be the best connection from the Central Valley to the Bay Area. Several organizations believe that this route, the Altamont Pass, was not given proper consideration in the Authority's Draft EIR/EIS as an alternative to the Pacheco Pass or Diablo Pass options.

The reasons for the elimination of the Altamont Pass as an alternative for a Northern Mountain Crossing are based on its supposed poor connectivity/accessibility, low ridership/revenue potential, significant environmental impacts, and lack of owning the right-of-way. However, each of these arguments has been countered by many northern San Joaquin cities, rail advocacy organizations, and environmental groups. These groups and many other individuals claim that the Altamont Pass would reach more riders living in higher density cities, have less environmental impacts than the other two alternatives, and be much more cost effective than either the Pacheco Pass running through Gilroy and Los Banos, or the Diablo Pass running through Henry Coe State Park. This controversy prompted the California High-Speed Rail Authority to extend its period of public review on the Draft EIR/EIS to August 31, 2004.<sup>8</sup>

This report aims to summarize and explore the debate over whether or not the Altamont Pass should have received more analysis in the Draft EIR/EIS as a possible alternative to the Diablo and Pacheco Passes. I will be compiling arguments from various environmental and transit advocacy groups, city and county politicians, special districts, and commissions. An examination of newspaper articles, periodicals, letters, websites, and interviews has led to an analysis of how these organizations position themselves in this controversy. My goal is to provide a document which, while conveying the arguments in support of both the Altamont and Pacheco Pass alternatives, analyzes the reasons—including issues of accessibility/connectivity, ridership/revenue, and the environment—that led to the initial decision to disregard the Altamont Pass option as a viable alternative.

## The Reasons

While there are still some who contend that a high-speed rail line should not even run between the Bay Area and Merced, there are many supporters of the train. The area in the proposed route includes the 13 counties of Madera, Merced, San Benito, Stanislaus, Santa Clara, Alameda, San Mateo, San Francisco, Contra Costa, Solano, Yolo, Sacramento, and San Joaquin. Between 1990 and 2000, the population in this region grew by 14%, from 7.6 million to 8.7 million people. By the year 2020, the region's population is expected to reach 10.8 million, an increase of 23% over 2000 levels.<sup>12</sup> Given these pressures, there is debate even among supporters of a high-speed train over which corridor would best meet the increasing travel demand in the region.

The Altamont Pass was eliminated from the Draft EIR/EIS because the California High-Speed Rail Authority believed the needs for connectivity/accessibility, ridership/revenue, the environment, and right-of-way could not be met with this corridor alignment option. While the report addressed the Authority's primary reasons for removing the Altamont Pass as a viable option to the Pacheco Pass, there was less information provided about the secondary reasons. This section of my analysis will summarize the Authority's primary reasons for its decision (a secondary reason—the "right-of-way" issue—was likewise not sufficiently discussed in the document). In addition, each of the issues raised in support of these reasons will be analyzed. The issues are defined in the Draft EIR/EIS as follows:<sup>9</sup>

### 1. Primary Reasons for Elimination

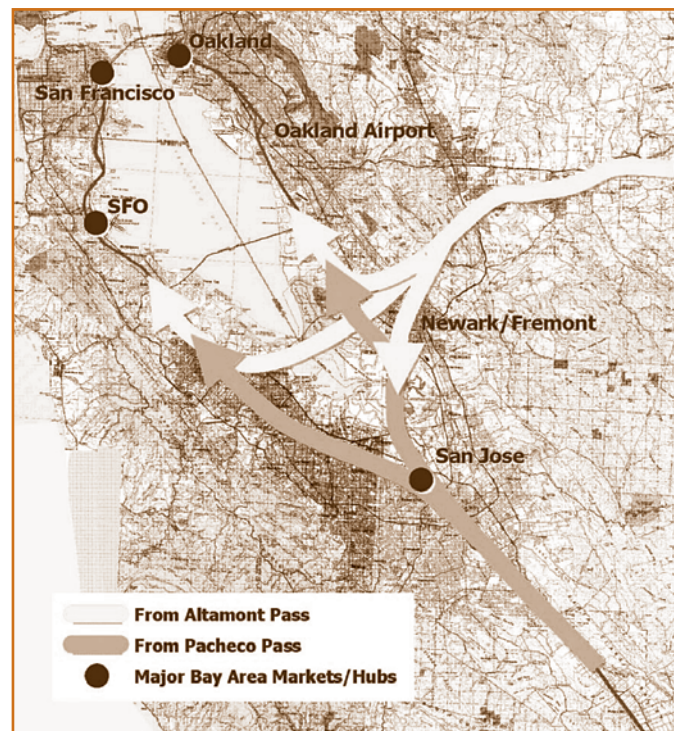
- a. *Connectivity / Accessibility* – Limited connectivity with other transportation modes (aviation, highway and/or transit systems) that would impair the service quality and could reduce ridership of the HST system was considered a criterion for failing to satisfy the project purpose.
- b. *Ridership / Revenue* – Longer trip times and/or suboptimal operating characteristics that would result in low ridership and revenue were considered criteria for failing to satisfy the project purpose.

### 2. Secondary Reasons for Elimination

- a. *Environment* – A high potential for considerable impacts to natural resources including waters, streams, floodplains, wetlands, and habitat of threatened or endangered species was considered a criterion for failing to meet project objectives.
- b. *Right-of-Way* – A lack of available right-of-way or extensive right-of-way needs that would result in excessively high acquisition costs for a corridor, technology, alignment, or station were considered criteria for project impracticability.

### CONNECTIVITY/ACCESSIBILITY

The Draft EIR/EIS maintains that the key reason for the removal of the Altamont Pass as an alternative lies in the infeasibility of operating the line. It argues that the Altamont corridor would lack connectivity and accessibility because the line would have to split in three different directions at Newark/Fremont to simultaneously serve San Jose, San Francisco, and Oakland (Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, it claims, the use of the Pacheco Pass would require the line to split in only two directions, branching from the San Jose station. Because the Altamont line would have an additional split, it is thought that it would ultimately provide less train service to each of the Bay Area major metropolitan areas. All trains via the Pacheco Pass would be able to serve San Jose regardless of whether San Francisco, Oakland, or both were served.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1:** Service Branching on Alignment Options<sup>10</sup>

The Draft EIR/EIS also states that the Altamont Pass would be an operationally difficult line with connectivity problems because it would include a segment crossing the San Francisco Bay via a new rail bridge, which would add considerable cost to the project.<sup>8</sup> Between the three-way line split and the Bay crossing, the Draft EIR/EIS argues that the Altamont Pass would not be able to run the highest frequency of service to the major Bay Area markets and that its accessibility would be more limited than that of the Pacheco Pass.<sup>8</sup>

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) is the transportation planning, coordinating and financing agency for the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area. On May 28, 2003, its Board of Directors voted to maintain its preference for the Pacheco Pass alternative despite hearing arguments from supporters of the Altamont Pass route, who felt it would better serve San Jose and the Silicon Valley.<sup>8</sup> High-Speed Rail Authority Executive Director Mehdi Morshed has noted that the MTC's regional

plans for transportation investments in the future and the degree to which the proposed transportation modes are coordinated with the existing intercity system is very important because the Authority hopes to complement its plans with the proposed high-speed rail system.<sup>4</sup>

The High-Speed Rail Authority feels that the removal of the Altamont Pass option from the Draft EIR/EIS is consistent with the project's purpose and needs because of the route's ineffectiveness to meet current and future intercity travel demand. Furthermore, it does not see this corridor option increasing the efficiency of intercity transportation.<sup>8</sup>

The infeasibility of splitting the Altamont line in three directions—toward Oakland, San Jose, and over the Bay toward San Francisco—may be significant enough to exclude it as an option; however, sufficient study of the Altamont corridor is the only way to determine this. While a Bay crossing might be avoided by going into San Jose and up the Peninsula, the Authority notes that this plan would require trains to reverse direction at a stub end station in San Jose (thus adding a minimum of 10 minutes additional travel time) to proceed north along the Peninsula.<sup>8</sup> This plan would add at least 22 minutes to the overall travel time beyond the travel time requirements of the Pacheco Pass option and would not meet the project's purpose and objectives. However, there is no detailed explanation in the Draft EIR/EIS of this alignment option. A more thorough analysis of the Altamont Pass might reveal other ways to provide service via this route.

The Draft EIR/EIS also attempts to demonstrate the connectivity/accessibility problem of the Altamont Pass option by comparing the frequency of train service that would be possible given the three-way split of Altamont with that possible given the two-way split of Pacheco. In an example, it points out that if 18 trains were to enter the Bay Area via the Pacheco Pass, then all 18 would enter through San Jose, with 9 each destined for Oakland and San Francisco. By comparison, it notes that if 18 trains were to enter the Bay Area via the Altamont Pass, then San Jose, Oakland and San Francisco would each only receive 6 trains, thus reducing the frequency of service that would be available at each station.

This example, however, fails to address why there are only 18 trains entering the Bay Area. While the timetables of the June 2000 Final Business Plan show that there are 18 trains entering the Bay Area every day, the Draft EIR/EIS specifies that there are 66 trains traveling daily to and from the Bay Area. This numerical inconsistency between the two documents could prove important when weighing the service frequencies of the two proposed alignments. It would make the route comparisons more meaningful if the figure of 66 trains were used in the Final Business Plan's timetables, as this is the number referred to in the Draft EIR/EIS (Table 1).

Alignment Option	Trains Entering Bay Area	Trains per Station		
		San Jose	Oakland	San Francisco
<i>Altamont Pass</i>	66	22	22	22
<i>Pacheco Pass</i>	66	66	33	33

It is also interesting that the Draft EIR/EIS places such a heavy emphasis on the importance of serving the three metropolitan areas of San Francisco, San Jose, and Oakland, when the initial phase of the project would include service only to San Francisco and San Jose—not Oakland. The timetable example for 2020 in the Final Business Plan includes the lines for San Francisco to San Diego, Sacramento

to San Diego, and Sacramento to San Francisco. Since there is no intention of even serving Oakland by the year 2020, placing the branching point at Newark/Fremont makes more sense than placing it at San Jose, since the latter placement would provide no service to the East Bay whatsoever.

Furthermore, the BART system could be utilized in the East Bay to increase connectivity with a high-speed rail line. For example, one could take the BART from the 12<sup>th</sup> St. Oakland City Center Station and connect to the high-speed Altamont Pass 36 minutes later at the Fremont station, or 38 minutes later at the Dublin/Pleasanton station (Figure 2). Those traveling from Oakland would still have relatively quick access to the high-speed train system (via BART) without having to commute via automobile to the nearest high-speed rail station. Accessibility would also be greater for people of the Sacramento region, who would have to drive an additional 40 miles to Merced to reach the Pacheco Pass line compared with Modesto if the Altamont Pass was used.

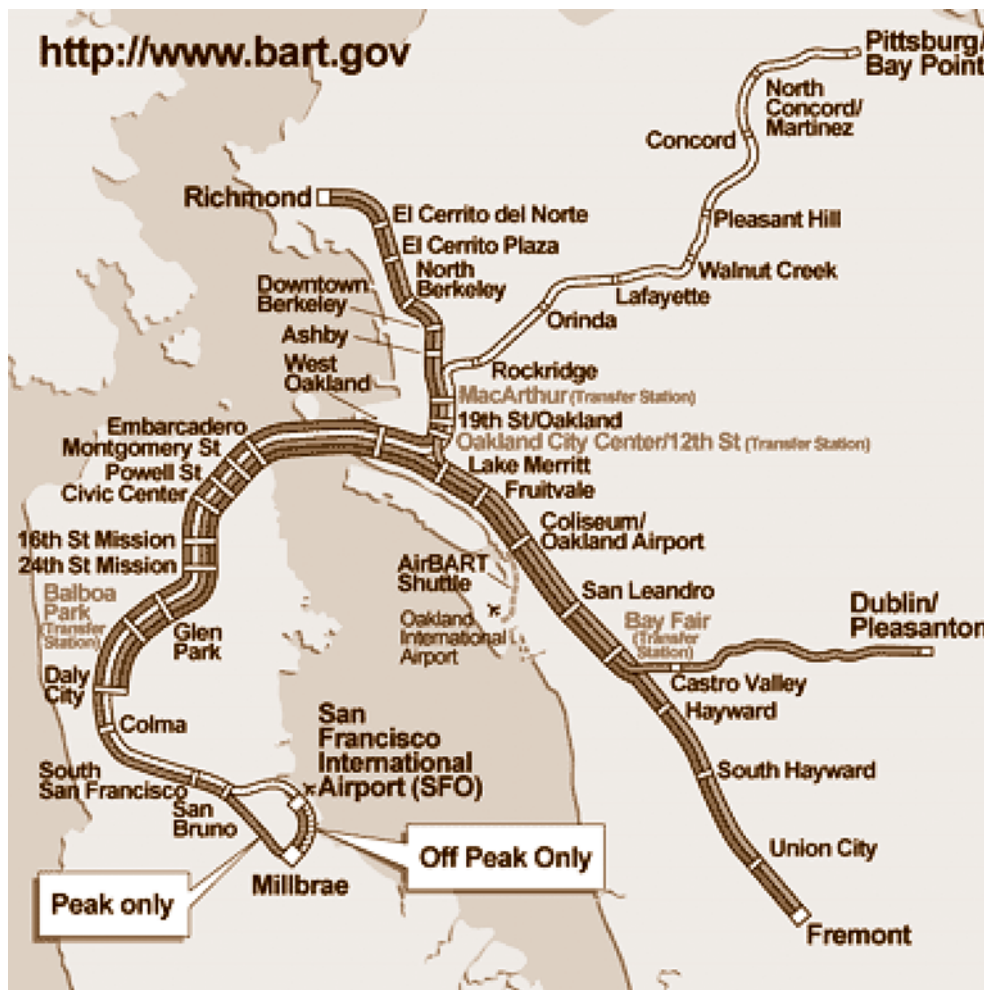


Figure 2: Map of the BART system<sup>25</sup>

Below is a table summarizing the major arguments on connectivity/accessibility for the removal from the Draft EIR/EIS of the Altamont Pass option and the responses to those arguments that have been outlined thus far.

**Table 2:** Major arguments and counter-arguments related to connectivity/accessibility.

<b>Connectivity / Accessibility</b>	
<i>Draft EIR/EIS Argument for the Removal of Altamont Pass Option</i>	<i>Analysis and Response to Draft EIR/EIS Argument</i>
Altamont line would have to split in three different directions and cross the San Francisco Bay in order to serve the major Bay Area markets	A more thorough analysis of the Altamont Pass might reveal other ways to provide service without a three-way line split and a Bay crossing
Using the Pacheco Pass would only require the line to split in two directions, occurring beyond the San Jose station	While a two-way split may offer more trains to Bay Area stations than a three-way split, the Draft EIR/EIS fails to demonstrate this in a clear, consistent manner
Altamont route would not be able to run the highest frequency of service to San Jose, San Francisco, and Oakland	Since Oakland is not included in Phase I plans for 2020, the Altamont line through Newark/ Fremont could provide service to the East Bay when the Pacheco could not
The HSRA does not see the Altamont Pass option increasing the efficiency of intercity transportation	The existing BART system could be used in conjunction with a high-speed rail network, connecting in several East Bay cities
The HSRA hopes to complement their plans with the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, who believe the Pacheco would better serve San Jose and the Silicon Valley	The HSRA should take the preferences of other Metropolitan Planning Organizations into account, as much Bay Area congestion results from Central Valley commuters

#### RIDERSHIP/REVENUE

The High-Speed Rail Authority also claims that the Altamont Pass route would generate significantly lower ridership/revenue than the Pacheco Pass route would, a second justification for the former corridor's elimination as an alternative. Although the Altamont Pass would provide a more direct link between the San Joaquin Valley and the Bay Area, the Authority argues that this area represents a relatively short distance market. Because short distance markets generate less revenue than longer-distance markets, they feel that improvements to the existing commuter rail service, the Altamont Commuter Express (ACE), would be a better way to serve Central Valley/Bay Area commuters.<sup>8</sup>

As Table 2 demonstrates, the Pacheco Pass would provide more frequent and efficient service to the major Bay Area markets than the Altamont Pass. With San Jose receiving three times as many trains via the Pacheco Pass as it would via Altamont Pass, the Draft EIR/EIS emphasizes the importance of serving the Silicon Valley and projects that the higher train frequency will result in higher ridership and

revenue. Additionally, the High-Speed Rail Authority argues that the greater ridership/revenue market is for long-distance travel. As a result, they prefer the Pacheco Pass, as it would attract more riders because it has a 10 minute shorter travel time (on express trains) than the Altamont Pass. The faster travel times between San Jose and southern California would also result in the Pacheco Pass having higher ridership and revenue potential. For the 2015 forecasts, the Pacheco Pass option is estimated to yield 1.1 million more riders (5.5%) and \$56 million more in revenue (8.0%) for service to San Francisco than the Altamont Pass route.<sup>8</sup>

The Draft EIR/EIS argument that the Pacheco Pass would offer greater ridership/revenue brings up other issues to consider. For instance, the trip between Sacramento and San Francisco via the Altamont Pass on an express train would take 59 minutes, whereas the same trip via the Pacheco Pass would take 1 hour and 40 minutes.<sup>8</sup> However, according to the June 2000 Final Business Plan's Timetables, a trip from Sacramento to San Francisco would take 1 hour and 45 minutes on one of the 9 daily semi-express trains and 2 hours and 20 minutes on the other 9 daily local-service trains. The timetables do not even include an express train. This is just one example of a discrepancy between these two documents, making the reader question which to believe.

More frequent train service to San Jose via the Pacheco Pass route does not necessarily result in greater ridership/revenue—especially as the Draft EIR/EIS fails to consider several important aspects of this topic. For instance, a person traveling from Los Angeles to San Francisco would be weighing the high-speed train against airplane and automobile as the mode of transportation. The additional 10 minutes that an express train traveling over the Altamont Pass would take becomes almost irrelevant when comparing the time it would take one to travel the same distance in a car or aircraft. However, the fact that the express train from Sacramento to San Francisco would take 40 minutes longer when traveling via the Pacheco Pass than via the Altamont Pass could have a significant impact on one's decision to travel by automobile or high-speed rail. While Amtrak's Capital Corridor from Sacramento to the East Bay is seeing a rise in ridership, the conventional train is still not competitive enough with the automobile because of schedule irregularity and fare prices. The increased interest in the train, however, is evidence of a growing community of rail commuters and a strong potential ridership for a high-speed train.

The June 2000 Final Business Plan states that 14% of the current intercity travel by geographic market in California consists of trips between Sacramento and San Francisco. However, only 12% of the current intercity travel by geographic market is made up of trips from Los Angeles to San Francisco. According to Mapquest.com, it should take 1 hour and 26 minutes to travel by automobile from Sacramento to San Francisco; however, I-80's typical traffic conditions usually make this trip closer to 2 hours. A high-speed rail line via the Altamont Pass would make this trip significantly shorter at 59 minutes, while a 1 hour and 40 minute trip via the Pacheco Pass would have more difficulty competing with the automobile. With high-speed rail via the Pacheco Pass as an alternative, the people of the Sacramento region would likely continue to travel by auto, and therefore continue to face severe delays on Interstates 80, 580, and 680 as a result. This is especially true if, as projected, the average daily volume of vehicles on Interstate 580 between the Bay Area and Stockton increases by 60% between 2000 and 2020 (Table 3).<sup>26</sup>

**Table 3:** Traffic Volumes in 2000 and 2020 at Pacheco Pass and Altamont Pass

Major Highways	Average Daily Volume 2000	Average Daily Volume 2020	% Change 2000-2020
<i>US 101 just south of San Jose</i>	232,000	320,000	38%
<i>I-580 between Bay Area &amp; Stockton (at Pleasanton)</i>	188,000	300,000	60%

The population density in each of the areas along the rail corridors is an aspect of ridership / revenue that the Draft EIR/EIS seems to ignore. The region containing the Altamont Pass maintains a much greater population than that containing the Pacheco Pass. The combined populations of Tracy and Pleasanton, the two cities where the proposed stations would be located with the Altamont Pass route, total about 120,000 (Table 4).<sup>27</sup>

**Table 4:** Population Densities for Proposed Stations on Altamont Pass<sup>27</sup>

HSR Proposed Stations	Population
<i>Tracy</i>	56,929
<i>Pleasanton</i>	63,654
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>120,583</b>

The combined populations of Gilroy, Los Banos, and Morgan Hill—the three cities where the proposed stations would be located for the Pacheco Pass route—total under 100,000 (Table 5).<sup>27</sup> The population figures just cited do not even account for adjacent smaller cities along the two routes; the population of outlying cities along the Altamont Pass corridor far outnumbered that of outlying cities near the Los Banos segment of the Pacheco Pass.

**Table 5:** Population Densities for Proposed Stations on Pacheco Pass<sup>27</sup>

HSR Proposed Stations	Population
<i>Gilroy</i>	41,464
<i>Los Banos</i>	< 25,000
<i>Morgan Hill</i>	33,556
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>&lt; 100,020</b>

Table 6 summarizes the major arguments on ridership/revenue for the removal from the Draft EIR/EIS of the Altamont Pass option and the responses to those arguments that have been outlined thus far.

<b>Ridership / Revenue</b>	
<i>Draft EIR/EIS Argument for the Removal of Altamont Pass Option</i>	<i>Analysis and Response to Draft EIR/EIS Argument</i>
Improvements to the existing commuter rail service, the Altamont Commuter Express (ACE), would be a better way to serve Central Valley / Bay Area commuters	An express trip between Sacramento and San Francisco via the Altamont Pass would take 59 minutes, whereas the same trip via the Pacheco Pass would take 1 hour and 40 minutes
A route via the Pacheco Pass would provide more frequent and efficient service to the major Bay Area markets than the Altamont Pass would	The additional 40 minutes that the Pacheco Pass would take to arrive in San Francisco from Sacramento might sway whether a person chooses to travel by auto or by high-speed rail
The Pacheco's higher frequency of service and faster travel times between San Jose and southern California, forecast the route to have higher ridership and revenue potential	Freeway congestion in the Sacramento region, densely populated cities in the East Bay, and increased use of Amtrak's Capital Corridor could attract large ridership for the Altamont

## ENVIRONMENT

The Draft EIR/EIS notes that the environmental impacts of the Altamont Pass route are too great to consider it as a viable alternative corridor. The greatest of these potential environmental impacts is the building of a new Bay crossing near the existing Dumbarton rail bridge. The Authority believes that the potential environmental and economic costs would be too great to construct a new bridge across the San Francisco Bay.<sup>8</sup> They also argue that a new Bay crossing would impact sensitive wetlands, saltwater marshes, and aquatic habitat within and surrounding Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, and would require costly mitigation measures to replace or restore wetlands that would be impacted, directly or indirectly, by a new bridge.<sup>8</sup> The Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) has also discouraged any new or expanded use of Bay waters or shoreline habitat important to sensitive Bay species. The potential for project delays and increased costs weighed as a significant factor in the review of the Altamont Pass option.<sup>8</sup>

Even Bay Area environmental groups that oppose any new or expanding development across the Bay, however, have not opposed further environmental analysis of the Altamont Pass as an option in the final EIR/EIS. The BCDC, for instance, as well as other environmental groups concerned about the potential Bay crossing, indicated at a meeting on April 8, 2004 in the Authority Chair's office that they have no objections to a study of the Altamont Pass alternative.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, environmental considerations of equal seriousness did not preclude the other corridor options from consideration. For example, a proposed segment of the line from San Jose to Oakland would cross the same Wildlife

Refuge via the Mulford line, yet this route was not eliminated as a possible line on the Pacheco Pass route. The environmental impacts of the Diablo Pass through Henry Coe State Park have been of much more concern to environmental organizations, yet the Diablo Pass was still studied as the only other possible corridor option to the Pacheco Pass as a route from the Bay Area to the Central Valley. That the Bay crossing segment of the Altamont Pass would have environmental impacts is not a sufficient reason to rule it out as an alternative.

Other environmental impacts involve the operation of the Pacheco Pass rail line. Low-density areas along the Pacheco Pass corridor such as Los Banos would likely experience sprawl if a high-speed rail line were built there. Despite plans for Transit-Oriented-Development around these high-speed rail stations near the less populated region lining Highway 152, there is great potential for induced growth. Additionally, the San Felipe Lake on the Pacheco Pass is an area that the Audubon Society has listed as an Important Bird Area, as it is a critical habitat for many local and migratory bird species.<sup>28</sup> There is concern among many environmental groups—including the Nature Conservancy, Planning and Conservation League Foundation, and Audubon Society of Santa Clara—over all of the alternatives considered in the current Draft EIR/EIS.<sup>15</sup>

Below Table 7 summarizes the major arguments on the environment for the removal from the Draft EIR/EIS of the Altamont Pass option and the responses to those arguments that have been outlined thus far.

<b>Table 7</b>	
<b>Environment</b>	
<i>Draft EIR/EIS Argument for the Removal of Altamont Pass Option</i>	<i>Analysis and Response to Draft EIR/EIS Argument</i>
The most significant environmental impact of the Altamont Pass is the building of a new Bay crossing near the existing Dumbarton rail bridge	The environmental impacts of the Diablo Pass through Henry Coe State Park have been of greater focus to environmental organizations than the potential impacts of the Altamont Pass
A new Bay crossing would impact sensitive wetlands, saltwater marshes, and aquatic habitat within and surrounding Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge	A proposed segment of the line from San Jose to Oakland would cross the same Wildlife Refuge via the Mulford line
The Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) has discouraged any new or expanded use of Bay waters or shoreline habitat important to sensitive Bay species	The BCDC indicated at a meeting in the HSRA Chair's office on April 8, 2004, that they have no objections to a study of the Altamont Pass alternative
In defense of the Pacheco Pass, there are plans for Transit-Oriented-Development around the proposed station locations in Los Banos, Gilroy, and Morgan Hill	The low-density cities in the eastern segment of the Pacheco Pass are candidates for induced growth, which could potentially harm local and migratory bird habitat

## SUMMARY OF REASONS FOR AND AGAINST ELIMINATION OF ALTAMONT PASS

The central argument in the Draft EIR/EIS for the elimination of the Altamont Pass is that this corridor would have to split in three different directions (versus the Pacheco's two) in order to serve San Jose, San Francisco, and Oakland; consequently, it would not be able to run the highest frequency of service to these major Bay Area markets. The most critical fact to note as a counter-argument is that high-speed trains would not even be in operation to Oakland by the year 2020, because that is not part of the initial Phase I construction. Moreover, this metropolitan area might be better served with the Altamont Pass, as the BART system would connect at the Newark/Fremont and Dublin/Pleasanton stations. While the Authority believes that a new Bay crossing would impact sensitive wetlands surrounding Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, there are far too many other environmental consequences of both the Pacheco and Diablo Pass options to single out the Altamont Pass for elimination as a possible rail corridor on these grounds. Further analysis of the Altamont Pass is the only way to accurately assess whether the Pacheco or Altamont corridors would best meet the needs of connectivity/accessibility, ridership/revenue, and the environment.

### The Debate

We will now examine the responses of nineteen various environmental groups, transit advocacy organizations, special districts, and county and state politicians to the elimination of the Altamont Pass as an optional corridor from the California High-Speed Train Draft EIR/EIS. Newspaper articles, periodicals, letters, websites, and interviews reveal how these organizations have positioned themselves in this controversy. Their positions are conveyed in both publicly and privately voiced answers and explanations to the questions: "Should the Altamont Pass have further analysis in the Draft EIR/EIS?" and "Does this organization support the Altamont or Pacheco Pass?" (Table 8). Further details about the positions of these organizations are included in the Appendix.

## THE POSITIONS OF VARIOUS ORGANIZATIONS IN THE ALTAMONT VS. PACHECO DEBATE

Regardless of which rail corridor is preferred, every environmental organization examined believes that the Altamont Pass should have further analysis in the Draft EIR/EIS. The Bay Conservation and Development Commission, Coastal Conservancy, and Save the Bay all indicated at an April 8, 2004 meeting in the Authority Chair's office that they do not oppose further analysis of the Altamont Pass alternative, because the Diablo Pass (a part of the planned Pacheco Pass route that would go through Henry Coe State Park) could have even greater environmental impacts.<sup>15</sup> The Loma Prieta Chapter of the Sierra Club believes that the High-Speed Rail Authority had no legal power to eliminate the Altamont corridor option from the CEQA process, and that further analysis is necessary to make the best alignment determination.<sup>18</sup> The Advocates for Coe Park believe that the High-Speed Rail Authority has broken state environmental laws by excluding a study of the once-favored Altamont Pass alternative in the project EIR.<sup>13</sup> The Planning and Conservation League Foundation notes that one positive reason for fully studying the Altamont Pass is that approximately 1 million more people live along this route, so it will serve existing population and development, rather than creating new sprawl in the Los Banos/Merced County area.<sup>19</sup>

Transit advocacy organizations likewise all agreed that the Altamont Pass should be studied in more depth and included as an alternative in the Final EIR/EIS. Transportation Involves Everyone, a transportation planning advocacy group, has urged federal regulators to halt the advancement of the high-speed rail project until the Altamont route has been fully studied.<sup>22</sup> Architecture 21 believes that the more communities that receive service in the first phase of the project, the greater the number of

people who will support the project and vote for the bond.<sup>24</sup> The Train Riders Association of California supports high-speed rail into the Bay Area, but not the exclusion of the Altamont alignment option.<sup>17</sup> The High-Speed Rail Watch Committee is firmly opposed to any rail route that would go through Henry Coe State Park; consequently, it is interested in further consideration of the Altamont pass option, and recommends that the Draft EIR/EIS be revised and re-circulated for another public comment cycle prior to any bonding vote.<sup>15</sup>

Special districts in the state, however, do not all agree that the Altamont Pass necessarily needs to be studied further. The Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority's Chair, Don Gage, has advocated with state legislators for the Pacheco Pass route.<sup>14</sup> The Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Transportation Committee (MTC) maintains its preference for the Pacheco Pass alternative despite hearing arguments for the Altamont Pass.<sup>8</sup> The Bay Area Air Quality Management District supports the decision of the MTC, their "sister agency," that the Pacheco Pass would best meet the needs of the Bay Area's transportation and air quality problems.<sup>29</sup> On the opposite side of the argument, the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District strongly recommends that the Final EIR/EIS include the Altamont Pass alternative, and that a more comprehensive analysis of all three corridors be conducted before dismissing any of them.<sup>21</sup> The Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG) believes that the ridership potential in the Sacramento area may have been underestimated by the High-Speed Rail Authority consultants, and the Board is urging that the ridership projections be re-evaluated; furthermore, SACOG recommends the Diablo Range Direct alternative if the Authority does not re-consider and choose the Altamont Pass.<sup>20</sup>

Government officials on the city, county, and state levels have also given their opinions on this debate. California State Assembly member Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, has urged the High-Speed Rail Authority to consider the I-580 corridor through the Altamont Pass as a possible route for the trains between the San Francisco Bay Area and the Central Valley.<sup>14</sup> Scott Haggerty, Supervisor for Alameda County, failed to convince his colleagues on the Metropolitan Transportation Commission to urge a full study of the Altamont option, noting that this corridor would ease congestion on I-580.<sup>22</sup> Roger Dickinson, District One Supervisor for Sacramento County, strongly favors the Altamont Pass alignment and notes that the Sacramento-Bay Area corridor is the third most heavily used in the United States.<sup>23</sup> Rudy Trevino, Mayor of Atwater, questions why the High-Speed Rail Authority reversed findings of its predecessor agency, which concluded that the Altamont route was the preferred option, and has promised to be a vocal ally for the Altamont Pass.<sup>22</sup>

**Table 8:** Organizations' Positions on the Altamont Pass vs. Pacheco Pass Debate

<i>Contact &amp; Information Source</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>"Should Altamont Pass have further analysis in Draft EIR/ EIS?"</i>	<i>Supporting Reason</i>	<i>"Does this organization support the Altamont or Pacheco Pass?"</i>	<i>Why?</i>
--	Bay Conservation and Development Commission	Yes	No Comment	Pacheco	Discourage any new or expanded line over the Bay
--	Coastal Conservancy	Yes	No Comment	No Formal Preference	Discourage any new or expanded line over the Bay
--	Save the Bay	Yes	No Comment	No Formal Preference	Discourage any new or expanded rail line over the Bay
Melissa Hippard, Chapter Director	Sierra Club Loma Prieta Chapter	Yes	Environmental, Ridership, Right-Of-Way; incompatible with CEQA laws	No Formal Preference	EIR Needs Further Analysis
--	Advocates for Coe Park	Yes	Environmental, Ridership; incompatible with CEQA laws	Pacheco	Focus is on protecting Henry Coe State Park; do not want Diablo route
Eddy Moore, Senior Project Manger	Planning and Conservation League Foundation	Yes	Environmental; incompatible with CEQA laws	No Formal Preference	EIR Needs Further Analysis
Ken Gosting, Executive Director	Transportation Involves Everyone	Yes	Ridership, Environment	Altamont	Ease I-580 congestion
Michael Kiesling, Director	Architecture 21	Yes	Environmental, Ridership	Altamont	Ease Congestion on I-80/580/680 and won't induce sprawl near Highway 152
Alan Miller, Executive Director	Train Riders Association of California	Yes	Environmental, Ridership, Right-of-Way, Accessibility, Cost	Altamont	Ease Congestion on I-80/580/680 and won't induce sprawl near Highway 152
Patrick Moore, Chair	High-Speed Rail Watch Committee	Yes	Environmental	Altamont	Ease Congestion on I-80/580/680 and won't induce sprawl near Highway 152

Contact & Information Source	Organization	“Should Altamont Pass have further analysis in Draft EIR/ EIS?”	Supporting Reason	“Does this organization support the Altamont or Pacheco Pass?”	Why?
Don Gage, Office of the Board Secretary	Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority	No Comment	No Comment	Pacheco	Maximize Service to San Jose
--	Metropolitan Transportation Commission	No Comment	No Comment	Pacheco	Maximizes Service to San Jose
Suzanne Bourguignon, Environmental Planner	Bay Area Air Quality Management District	No Comment	No Comment	Pacheco	Wants to Coincide with MTC
Larry Greene, Air Pollution Control Officer	Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District	Yes	Environmental, Ridership, incompatible with CEQA laws	No Formal Preference	EIR Needs Further Analysis
Martin Tuttle, Executive Director	Sacramento Area Council of Government	Yes	Environmental	Altamont	Most Efficient Route from Sacramento to Bay Area
Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento	California State Assembly	Yes	Environmental, Accessibility, Ridership, Cost	Altamont	Ease Congestion on I-80/580/680 and won't induce sprawl near Highway 152
Scott Haggerty, Supervisor	County of Alameda	Yes	Ridership, Environment	Altamont	Ease I-580 congestion
Roger Dickinson, Supervisor for District One	County of Sacramento	No Comment	Ridership	Altamont	Ease Congestion on I-80/580/680
Rudy Trevino, Mayor	City of Atwater	Yes	Ridership	Altamont	Ease Congestion on I-80/580/680

**INTERPRETATION OF POSITIONS**

The most significant finding is not these organizations’ support for either the Pacheco or Altamont Pass alternatives, but rather the agreement of an overwhelming majority that there should be further analysis of the Altamont Pass as an option. Not a single organization voiced the opinion that the Altamont Pass should not be considered further, and all ten environmental and transit advocacy groups believed that the Draft EIR/EIS should have more thoroughly studied the possible corridor alignment options (Table 9).

**Table 9:** Organizations’ Preferences for Corridor vs. Further Analysis

		Corridor Preference		
		<i>Altamont</i>	<i>Pacheco</i>	<i>No Formal Preference</i>
Further Analysis in EIR/EIS	<i>Yes</i>	8	2	5
	<i>No</i>			
	<i>No Comment</i>	1	3	

Supporters of the Pacheco Pass option fell into two groups. The first feels so strongly that the Diablo Pass would cause extreme environmental damage to Henry Coe State Park that they are in support of the only other alternative: the Pacheco Pass. It is important to note here that those in this first group believe further analysis on the Altamont Pass should be done. The second group is comprised of organizations whose primary concern is serving the San Jose region. The Bay Area Air Quality Management District and its “sister-planning agency,” the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, both support the Pacheco Pass as the best means to meet the increasing population and job growth in the Silicon Valley; however, neither agency has voiced support for researching the option of the Altamont Pass option.

**SUMMARY OF THE POSITIONS OF VARIOUS ADVOCACY GROUPS**

There are several different reasons organizations give to support why they believe the Altamont Pass should have received further analysis in the Draft EIR/EIS. Several groups believe that the California High-Speed Rail Authority is in violation of California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) laws, which require the proper studying of all viable alternatives. Organizations also note that the Altamont Pass would have greater ridership potential, as it would travel through a more densely populated area with stations potentially located at Tracy, Livermore, and Pleasanton. In contrast, the Pacheco Pass would pass through potential station locations in Los Banos and Gilroy, prompting environmental concerns about the sacrifice of agricultural land to suburban sprawl in these low-density cities. Another environmental concern is the growing congestion on Interstates 80, 580, and 680. Because the Altamont Pass would offer a significantly shorter travel time for those traveling between Sacramento and San Francisco, many argue that this route option would help alleviate vehicle miles traveled and the associated air pollution.

## **Conclusions**

It is as important to examine the reasons that the High-Speed Rail Authority felt it necessary to remove the Altamont Pass as a possible corridor option from the Draft EIR/EIS as it is to summarize the debate surrounding the controversy, in order to comprehensively and accurately assess the High-Speed Rail Authority's decision. While there are claims that the Altamont Pass does not meet the criteria for connectivity/accessibility, ridership/revenue, and the environment, this report demonstrates that these assertions will remain refutable until further study is done on this corridor. Additionally, that the public has become so vocal about making sure the Altamont Pass is included in the Final EIR/EIS may be reason alone for the Authority to reconsider its decision. If no consideration is given to studying the Altamont Pass in greater depth, there are likely to be lawsuits filed over the violation of CEQA codes, as several organizations have already noted.

An ultimate decision to support the Pacheco Pass option would carry greater weight and perhaps dull the controversy if the Altamont Pass option were given proper analysis first. The public might better be able to see why the Altamont Pass would not serve the high-speed train's purpose. Not providing enough information on an issue while disregarding it as impractical does not build credibility. Realistically, the Authority will have the final say on the project's design, so it makes sense to do the proper analysis before making a final decision. Even if after the analysis it maintains its preference for the Pacheco Pass, public attacks on the planning insufficiencies might subside. Of course, it is just as likely that even with suitable studies on the Altamont Pass, some organizations will still remain unhappy with a decision for the Pacheco Pass and continue to advocate for the Altamont corridor until the very end.

How much good does all this debating actually do? With California's system of planning, the responsibility of monitoring actions often lies in the hands of the general public. The people will continue to hold any agency accountable for their planning process in order to be sure that laws are being upheld, and that the needs of the people and the environment are being met. Without public input on controversial planning efforts, we might well be subject to a greater number of inadequate infrastructure projects.

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### **Author's note:**

After the writing of this essay, the Final Program Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Study (EIR/EIS) was released in September 2005 by the California High-Speed Rail Authority, in collaboration with the Federal Railroad Administration. Preparations are currently under way for a separate, next-tier Program EIR/EIS that will address the choice of the corridor alignment and station locations in the segment of the high-speed train system that will connect the San Francisco Bay Area to the Central Valley. The Bay Area to Central Valley Program EIR/EIS will include an analysis of the Altamont Pass as one of the corridor alignment options.

**APPENDIX****a. Patrick Moore, Chair, High-Speed Rail Watch Committee**

- i. They are firmly opposed not only to a rail route that would go through Coe Park, but one that avoids the Altamont altogether. In their presentation before council, they showed two photographs, taken at about the same time of day, along the Pacheco Pass' Highway 152 and Interstate 580 that connects the Central Valley to the Tri-Valley cities of Livermore, Pleasanton and Dublin via the Altamont Pass. The I-580 route had nearly three times as many cars as along Pacheco Pass.<sup>16</sup>
- ii. "The Altamont should never have been dropped. There are '10 times' more people in that part of the Bay Area."<sup>16</sup>
- iii. "NEPA guidelines require that a project must contain all feasible alternatives for consideration. Throughout the DEIR, the California High-Speed Rail Authority (CHSRA) fails to support its conclusions regarding project impacts with appropriate analysis and provides little supporting evidence and documentation. Locally, the best example of these problems is the exclusion of the heavily-populated Altamont Pass (I-580 corridor) option from the environmental review process."<sup>15</sup>
- iv. "The DEIR is supposed to be providing that environmental information to the public and the CHSRA Board so an informed decision can be made by all interested parties. Unfortunately, the DEIR fails in this task. Because of this failure, the HSR Watch Committee is reluctantly forced to recommend that the DEIR be revised and recirculated for another public comment cycle prior to any bonding vote."<sup>15</sup>

**b. Mellissa Hippard, Chapter Director, Loma Prieta Sierra Club**

- i. Hippard notes that the Altamont Pass was considered by the HSR Commission's report in 1996 as the preferred alternative. It meets important criteria, especially maximizing the use of existing transportation corridors and rights-of-way. It also serves the Sacramento area more efficiently than the Pacheco Pass option, by about 45 minutes. It is the least likely to induce sprawl. The HSRA had no legal authority to drop this option from the process when they did.<sup>18</sup>

**c. Alan Miller, Executive Director, Train Riders Association of California**

- i. Organization supports high-speed rail, but not the exclusion of the Altamont alignment into the Bay Area.<sup>17</sup>
- ii. "We want it built, but we want it built right the first time. On a project this expensive you can't go back and do it over."<sup>17</sup>

**d. Eddy Moore, Senior Project Manger, Planning and Conservation League Foundation**

- i. Moore explains some positive reasons for fully studying Altamont include: (1) Approximately 1 million more people live along this route, so it will serve existing population and development, rather than creating new sprawl in the Los Banos/Merced County area, and (2) Altamont would serve the East Bay, Modesto, Stockton, and Tracy in PHASE ONE of the project. The other alignments would not serve these areas until the distant future, when a possible phase two is added. The connection to Sacramento, which adds a great deal of ridership / revenue would be easier to build from a phase one Altamont system.<sup>19</sup>
- ii. The position of this organization is that the state must first study each route and compare the outcomes for transportation and for the environment. Then, as CEQA intends, the public can make a fully informed decision.<sup>19</sup>

**e. Christopher Cabaldon, Chair of the Board of Directors, Sacramento Area Council of Governments**

- i. "The SACOG Board joins those asking for a re-evaluation of the Altamont corridor because of its potential benefits of creating a quick and direct connection between Sacramento and Bay Areas. We believe that the ridership potential in the Sacramento area may have been underestimated by CHSRA's consultants and the

- Board would urge that the ridership projections be re-evaluated.<sup>20</sup>
- ii. “Upon further study, if the Altamont option is infeasible, the SACOG Board would urge adoption of the Diablo Range Direct alternative.<sup>20</sup>”
- f. Advocates for Coe Park**
- i. They believe the High-speed Rail Authority has broken state environmental laws by not including a study of the once-favored Altamont Pass alternative in the project EIR. The Advocates, however, endorse a Pacheco Pass route.<sup>13</sup>
  - g. Roger Dickinson, District One Supervisor, Sacramento County
  - i. Dickinson strongly favors the Altamont Pass alignment, based on the information he has received, in order to provide the best connection possible between the Sacramento region and the Bay Area. Currently, the Sacramento-Bay Area corridor is the third most heavily used in the United States. He advocates that the HSRA should plan high speed rail to take advantage of that fact and the even greater potential.<sup>23</sup>
- h. Scott Haggerty, Supervisor, Alameda County**
- i. Haggerty failed to convince his colleagues on the Metropolitan Transportation Commission to urge a full study of the Altamont. He thinks the trains would ease congestion on I-580.<sup>22</sup>
- i. Rudy Trevino, Mayor, City of Atwater**
- i. Trevino questions why the Rail Authority reversed findings of its predecessor agency, which concluded the Altamont route was best. He has also stated that he would be a vocal ally for the Altamont Pass, even if the results don't change<sup>22</sup>
- j. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, California State Assembly Member**
- i. Steinberg said the Altamont route would cut the travel time between Sacramento and the Bay Area, serve a bigger population, possibly have less of an environmental impact than the routes to the south, and could save as much as \$2 billion under consideration by the Authority.<sup>14</sup>
  - ii. Steinburg has also urged the Rail Authority to consider the I-580 corridor through the Altamont Pass as a possible route for the trains between the San Francisco Bay Area and the Central Valley.<sup>14</sup>
- k. Don Gage, Chair, Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority**
- i. Gage supports the high-speed train, which might stop in his hometown of Gilroy, but he has not submitted a comment on the draft EIR.<sup>14</sup>
  - ii. “I have discussed it with some of the legislators because I would like to see it come though the Pacheco Pass route.<sup>14</sup>”
- l. Larry Greene, Air Pollution Control Officer, Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District**
- i. “Dismissal of the Altamont Pass corridor alternative at this level may not be appropriate. With the counter-vailing forces for and against the three corridors, we believe the EIR and EIS should analyze all three of the corridors more comprehensively before dismissing any of them. We strongly recommend that the environmental documents include the Altamont Pass alternative.<sup>21</sup>”
- m. Michael Kiesling, Director, Architecture 21**
- i. “The more communities that receive service in the first phase of the project, the greater the number of people who will support the project and vote for the bond. The great the total rout miles, the greater the total system capital cost, the greater the travel times, the greater the operating costs, and the greater the overall cost.<sup>24</sup>”

- n. **Ken Gosting, Executive Director, Transportation Involves Everyone**
  - i. This transportation planning advocacy group has urged federal regulators to halt the advancement of this high-speed rail project until the Altamont route has been fully studied.<sup>22</sup>
- o. **Mehdi Morshed, Executive Director, California High Speed Rail Authority**
  - i. Morshed believes the objective is to serve the inter-city transportation needs of California in 2020 and beyond. It's not to serve commute trips. It (Altamont Pass) won't serve commute trips. It's for trips that are too far to drive and too near to fly.<sup>22</sup>
- p. **The Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC)**
  - i. The MTC is the transportation planning, coordinating and financing agency for the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area. On May 28, 2003, its Board of Directors voted to maintain its preference for the Pacheco Pass alternative despite hearing arguments for the Altamont Pass, emphasizing the importance of serving San Jose and the Silicon Valley.<sup>8</sup>

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