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COMMENTARY

Opinion: The Coaster train doesn't make sense for San Diego anymore. Let's turn it into a trail.

The Coaster train rides along the beach in Del Mar on Friday, June 25, 2021 in Del Mar, CA. (Jarrod Valliere/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

SANDAG needs a forward-looking benefit-cost analysis — as the U.S. Department of Transportation requires — to identify the best option to achieve our goals.

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San Diego Association of Governments' first step toward relocating the coastal train off Del Mar's eroding bluff should be a forward-looking benefit-cost analysis to identify the best alternative to the existing location. It may be a rail-to-trail conversion.

Del Mar bluff erosion makes the coastal rail line unsustainable. SANDAG has focused on one remedy: rail relocation, a venture estimated to take 12 years and cost $4 billion. But is moving the rail worth the cost? To answer this question, SANDAG needs a forward-looking benefit-cost analysis — as the U.S. Department of Transportation requires — to identify the best option to achieve our goals.

The alternatives evaluated should include the retirement of the rail line. The rail line is not essential. San Diego was not significantly affected when bluff collapse led to months-long train outages. Consider each rail line use: military, freight and passenger train.

A spokesperson for Camp Pendleton said that closure would have "little to no impact" because most military equipment is moved on trucks.

Regarding freight, the rail line moves 0.04 percent of California's freight. Interstate 5 could readily absorb this freight without increasing congestion. In the 12 years it would take to build a tunnel, vehicle technology advances will significantly increase I-5 capacity, especially at night when self-driving trucks can platoon effectively.

The prominent use of the rail line is passenger trains. Yet passenger use has been declining since 2016 on the Del Mar segment. If we optimistically assume ridership increases to the 2019 pre-pandemic levels of 1,134,881 round-trips per year, a tunnel tax of $132 per round-trip in 2023 dollars would be required to cover the $4 billion cost, assuming a 3 percent real discount rate and a 100-year tunnel life.

One of the Coaster's glaring problems is equity. The train's tiny ridership caters to the highest-income residents in San Diego. 64 percent of the Coaster's riders have incomes of $75,000 or more, and 97 percent own a car and typically drive their cars to the train station. There are many better opportunities to improve transit, especially for those with less income.

The economics become even more absurd when one recognizes the additional billions required for the tunneling in San Clemente for the train to reach Los Angeles.

But wouldn't the rail line reduce emissions and traffic congestion? Sadly, no. The diesel train is a source of noise, carbon, nitrogen oxide and particulate emissions. The train diverts 4,500 out of 1.3 million daily automobile trips, or 0.3 percent from I-5. A rail-to-trail conversion would move many more without emissions.

Transportation is undergoing a rapid transformation. These new technologies offer consumers better options. Better options displace rail. Transportation technologies most apt to displace passenger trains include e-bikes, e-scooters and self-driving vehicles. The specific technologies adopted will depend on which technologies best serve consumers. Vibrant competition among these technologies will bring rapid gains in services at reduced cost.

These technologies will improve transportation efficiency. Congested highways can benefit from self-driving vehicles. Freeway capacity increases when self-driving vehicles, both passenger and freight, move cooperatively to maximize safe throughput.

Even before self-driving arrives, ridesharing and carpooling apps will continue to displace train passengers. These apps have the enormous advantage of doing what users want: moving from A to B. With trains, the user must get from A to the train station and then from another train station to B. This is a primary reason cars tend to dominate trains.

With retirement, the rail corridor can become a vibrant green passageway connecting communities up and down the coast. Today, countless walkers, runners and bikers are moving along the coast. The demand is proven.

Rails-to-trails have a long history of success in urban areas. They have been shown to improve public health, boost economic development and connect communities. Here are a few examples. The High Line in New York City is a 1.45-mile-long elevated park built on a former freight rail line; it is now one of the most popular tourist destinations in New York City. The Riverwalk in San Antonio is a 15-mile-long pedestrian and bicycle trail along the San Antonio River; it is a popular tourist destination and a significant economic driver. The Emerald Necklace in Boston is a system of parks and parkways; it includes several rails-to-trails, including the Charles River Bike Path and the Esplanade. These rail-to-trail conversions harness the natural beauty of the setting. The same — in abundance — would be true in San Diego.

Passenger train usage has declined in recent years because people have better options. This trend will continue in the years ahead as new technologies bring ever-better options. A rail-to-trail pathway would move more people along our beautiful coast at a fraction of the expense and bring joy to all who use it. Let’s move to the future and not tunnel to maintain the past.

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