



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on January 31, 2012

Getting Nowhere, Very Fast — on High-speed Rail

California has a huge state debt and Washington has a huge national debt. But that does not discourage either Governor Jerry Brown or President Barack Obama from wanting to launch a very costly high-speed rail system.

Most of us might be a little skittish about spending money if we were teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. But the beauty of politics is that it is all other people's money, including among those other people generations yet unborn.

The high-speed rail system proposed for California has been envisioned as a model for similar systems elsewhere in the United States. A recent story in the *San Francisco Chronicle* used the high-speed rail system in Spain as an analogy for California.

Spain is about the same size as California, and has a similar population density — and population density is the key to the economic viability of mass transportation, from subways to high-speed rail.

It so happens that I have ridden on Spain's high-speed rail system. It was very nice, especially since I did not have to pay the full costs, which were subsidized by the Spanish taxpayers.

While the Spanish government has been subsidizing the passengers on its high-speed rail system, the European Union has been subsidizing the Spanish government. Someone once said that government is the illusion that we can all live off somebody else. Spain's high-speed rail system is not even covering its operating costs, never mind the enormous costs of setting up the system in the first place. One reason is that half the seats are empty in the high-speed trains in Spain.

That is what happens when you don't have the population density required for passengers to cover the operating costs. You would need the hordes of Genghis Khan riding the high-speed rail system to cover the additional costs of the rails and the trains.

An economics professor at the University of Barcelona says that Spain "has not recovered one single euro from the infrastructure investment."

The most famous high-speed rail system is that in Japan, one of the most densely populated countries in the world. The "bullet train" between Tokyo and Osaka has 130 million riders a year. Tokyo alone has more than three times the population of San Francisco and Los Angeles put together.

In California, an element of farce has been added to the impending economic tragedy, if the envisioned high-speed rail system actually materializes.

The first leg of the system is planned to run between Fresno and Bakersfield. If those names don't ring a bell with you, there is a reason. They are modest-sized communities out in the agricultural San





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Joaquin Valley, well removed from San Francisco or Los Angeles.

You can bet the rent money that high-speed rail traffic between Fresno and Bakersfield will never come within shouting distance of covering the operating costs. Some people have analogized putting such a rail line between these two towns to the infamous “bridge to nowhere” in Alaska.

Why are they doing it? Because they can.

If they began this project where they want it to go — between San Francisco and Los Angeles — they would run into so much opposition from the environmentalists, and from local politicians influenced by the environmentalists, that the delays could take the high-speed rail advocates beyond the time limit for using the federal subsidy money. But the green fanatics have not yet taken over politically out in the San Joaquin Valley.

The only reason for even thinking about building a high-speed rail line between Fresno and Bakersfield is just to get the project underway with federal money, making it politically more difficult to stop the larger project for a similar rail line between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

In other words, they are going to start wasting money out in the valley, so that they will be able to waste more money later on, along the coast. This may not make any sense economically, but it can make sense politically for Jerry Brown and Barack Obama.

An old song ended, “You’ve been running around in circles, getting nowhere — getting nowhere very fast.” On high-speed rail.

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