

Testimony to the California State Senate Transportation Committee

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The California High Speed Rail Project: Reviewing peer review

“Peer review” has been used in multiple contexts to provide input and validate results

At virtually every stage of the planning process, the CHSRA has used review processes. They have received feedback on operations, geotechnical and earthquake engineering, business plans and ridership forecasting models. The current ridership model has had three separate “peer reviews” since its creation in 2005.

Peer review has a long history in validating science; best practices have been developed

Peer review is now considered a cornerstone in the scientific method and a key tool used to fund “the best science, by the best scientists”

- 1) Independence of reviewers is paramount
- 2) Conflict of interest and bias (both negative and positive) taint reviews
- 3) Reviewers are typically unpaid
- 4) Protection for reviewers in case of negative review
- 5) Standardized formats for presentation of results

Peer review has significant limitations and is not a “cure-all”

- 1) Reviewers are not there “at scene of the crime”
- 2) Only one part of quality control
- 3) Finding true peers can be difficult
- 4) Limited protection against momentum of mega-project
- 5) Real review needs as many eyeballs as possible

California High Speed Rail Independent Peer Review Group

- 1) Established by legislature as part of bond measure
- 2) Two members (transit provider representatives) given statutory exemption from incompatible offices prohibition
- 3) Role to opine on “funding plan” and other aspects of project
- 4) Only established after key aspects of project set in concrete
- 5) Issued several influential reports and testified to this committee
- 6) CHSRA issued ranting, inflammatory response to a negative report
- 7) Group delayed issuing additional negative report upon request of CHSRA

Ridership model review – initial peer review

- 1) Three peer review meetings planned as part of model development
- 2) Members chosen and paid by ridership consultant
- 3) Limited impact on modeling

Ridership model review – Berkeley ITS review

- 1) Response to model failing “sniff test”; asked is model reliable
- 2) Berkeley ITS chosen by this committee; approved by CHSRA
- 3) Berkeley paid \$36,000 by CHSRA
- 4) Scope of review limited
- 5) Back and forth with model developer, had to rely on modeler’s assertions
- 6) Negative findings denounced by CHSRA

Ridership model review – Independent Peer Review Panel

- 1) Proposed by CHSRA as response to criticism
- 2) Mandate to help develop next version of model; not to opine on model
- 3) Members highly compensated
- 4) Bulk of work done by Frank Koppelman who had significant conflicts of interest
- 5) Meetings not public
- 6) Reports issued but not designed for general consumption and only made public through contentious Public Records Act requests

Recommendations

- 1) Create guidelines with rules and expectations. If it is called peer review, it needs to meet very strict criteria
- 2) Need special disclosure form, with consequences for omitting conflict
- 3) If the members work for the project sponsor, it is an advisory panel , not peer review
- 4) Limit compensation
- 5) Incompatible offices doctrine should be respected
- 6) Protection for those who participate
- 7) Public participation vital

Ridership Peer Review Panel Payments

Member	Affiliation	Billing Rate	Initial Contract	Additional Billings	Hours
Frank Koppelman	Northwestern University (Emeritus)	\$400	\$49,600	\$231,000	578
Billy Charlton	SF Muni	\$156	\$27,000	\$17,843	114
Eric J. Miller	University of Toronto	\$250	\$30,000	\$52,000	208
Kay Axhausen	Swiss Federal Insitute of Technology Zurich	\$350	\$39,200	\$64,400	184
Kenneth Small	UC Irvine (Emeritus)	\$350	\$42,000	\$58,737	168
Total			\$187,800	\$423,980	