

Logan Jenkins

Maglev train talk stirs yet more discussion



"Maglev not war."

Among brainy types with slide rules, that was the inside joke in Palo Alto

during the late 1960s.

Howard Coffey, a young physicist at the Stanford Research Institute, made the play on "make love not war" possible. He claims credit for yoking "magnetic" and "levitation" to coin "maglev," a stroke of linguistic genius.

"I am certainly a disappointed advocate of maglev transportation who hopes that we will someday see it deployed," the Carlsbad resident wrote me last week.

Coffey's was among dozens of responses to last week's column on downtown developer Sandor Shapery's ambitious initiative to sail maglev trains above Interstate 5, linking San Diego's airport with the three coastal airports to the north.

To be sure, some readers, including Harry Sutton of Chula Vista, were skeptical.

"Maglev is futuristic and has been hyped as the 'wave of the future,'" Sutton said, "but as of today it is a very costly (com-

pared to conventional high-speed rail) and very much an unproven transportation mode with enormous drawbacks." To buttress his point, Sutton sent a clip file of negative maglev reviews.

Irving Smith of Carlsbad poked fun at what he calls a "pig in a poke": "A system that will bring in billions and not require subsidies has never happened in the country and never will. I saw U.S. Secretary of Transportation (John) Volpe make a similar claim in 1970. I laughed then and am still laughing. Private industry will not put the \$\$\$ into this to make it happen. . . . I have sent this column back to my friends in Washington, D.C. They need a laugh in these dark times."

Others see merit in maglev, but doubt it will be permitted to get off the ground. "The same automobile manufacturers and oil companies that tore up the tracks of a clean electric rail system through the country will oppose maglev," predicted John St. John of Spring Valley.

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The prospect of installing maglev trains on I-5 — and ripping up the coastal track —

worried several readers. How will freight make its way to San Diego?

Eric Stevens of El Cajon supported the traditional method of moving heavy goods. He asked: "Ever hear the adage? Shoemaker, stick to your last?"

This attachment to the past frustrates Don Billings, a Del Mar area resident who advocates pushing mass transit from the fragile coast to the interstate.

Billings points out that a relatively small amount of freight travels via rail from Los Angeles to San Diego. In his view, adequate port capacity here (or in Baja) — plus an east-west rail line — is the long-term freight solution.

"These people need to look forward 50 years because these are 50- and 100-year (or longer) investments," Billings offered.

Other readers touted transit advances that may prove superior to maglev. Jerry Schneider, a University of Washington professor, has identified 75 emerging transit systems that deserve consideration.

"I hope you will look at MegaRail in particular (www.megarail.com), as I see it being more than competitive with

maglev and a fraction of the cost," Schneider said of the versatile system, which runs on electrified rails.

James Jordan, president of the Interstate Maglev Project in Falls Church, Va., urges an evolutionary leap beyond maglev projects under way in Germany, Japan, China and the United States.

To survive an impending, and permanent, oil shortage, Jordan and James Powell, inventor of superconducting maglev technology in the '60s, advocate a "second-generation" maglev network crisscrossing the country. High-speed track switching — and the transport of heavy freight — are not pie in the sky, they contend.

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As a nostalgic postscript, I received several calls and e-mails reminding that Rohr Industries in Chula Vista was a maglev pioneer in the late '60s.

Gene Perusse worked on the Romag program under the project's mastermind, Jim Ross. A 30-person Romag vehicle widened eyes at "Transpo 72" in Washington, D.C.

In contrast, Germany and Japan, today's maglev leaders, brought model-railroad-size demos to the exposition, Perusse recalled. (A year earlier, Rohr speculated that a maglev train in a tunnel could reach speeds of 2,000 mph, creating major buzz.)

Work on Romag continued until 1976 when the Department of Transportation "decided to support only rubber-on-stone and steel-on-steel vehicle technology," wrote Perusse, who lives in University City.

Romag was sold to Boeing, but maglev never took off in Seattle.

Today, the last remains of Rohr's visionary project are rumored to be stored at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

A college press officer snooped around last week, but reported Friday that she could find no trace of Romag on campus.

Perhaps in a basement somewhere, Rohr's magical Rosebud gathers dust.

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