

Logan Jenkins

Maglev pulling interest as airport alternative



How many human sacrifices would San Diego County be willing to accomplish all of the following:

- With no Miramar miracle in sight, single-runway Lindbergh Field remains the region's major airport *with no future economic downside.*
 - A high-speed coastal rail system — quieter, faster and safer than any other form of land travel, and built and operated without government subsidy — links Southern California's major airports.
 - A total of 800,000 Mexican diesel trucks per year disappear from San Diego County's roads as the region's freight distribution — from the border maquiladoras as well as the port terminals — *improves.*
 - The steel-wheel trains along the fragile North County coast vanish, the track is sold as scrap and the right-of-way is reimagined for the public good.
- Opium pipe dreams of pie in the sky?
I don't think so.
When you and I pass judgment on the region's future air-

port, as we are scheduled to do in November 2006, we owe it to future generations to think outside the runway.

Potentially, a new airport is not nearly as life-changing as the futuristic vision of Sandy Shapery, the San Diego hotel developer who is masterminding a plan to link the major Southern California airports with 300 mph magnetic-levitation trains. (Interairport travel time: 30 minutes or less.)

A year ago, I did what I could to cheerlead for this project, which can be viewed in detail on Shapery's Web site, www.sdlmaglev.org.

My thinking was — and still is — simple: The future of transportation, as opposed to ever-improving information technology, is a long time coming. It takes a heroic exertion of civic will to change the way we think about the way we move around.

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So what has the year wrought?

First, Shapery's profile is much higher. He now holds a nonvoting seat on the San Diego Association of Governments, the region's transporta-

tion agency. He is at the big table.

Second, the maglev project is expanding in scope. After talks with port and border officials, Shapery believes the maglev grid easily could include 10th Avenue Marine Terminal and National City Marine Terminal as well as a station at the border, where convoys of trucks cross into the United States every day. Up north, the line would connect to the major airports as well as the huge Colton rail yard in San Bernardino County.

Two-track maglev lines, which can glide over the middle of interstates, can be designed to carry freight, Shapery said, though at somewhat slower speeds.

Third, Rep. Bob Filner, D-San Diego, recently dragged home some federal pork, \$800,000, for studying a maglev line to the Imperial Valley airport he is touting. Some of that money, assuming SANDAG bundles together \$200,000 in matching funds, could be used to study the north-south line, Shapery says.

Slowly but steadily, maglev is inching its way into the public consciousness.

A North County example: Del Mar is terrified that, in the course of double-tracking the current coastal rail, a tunnel will be built underneath the tiny city. At a meeting last week of a Del Mar rail advisory committee, maglev on Interstate 5 popped up as a potential panacea.

Maybe, but not directly.

As Shapery points out, his plan is an express system. Not a lot of stops. For example, he envisions one North County station in Oceanside to connect with the east-west Sprinter.

For commuter or local passengers, the long-range alternative to the Coaster is train-like buses on dedicated I-5 lanes. TransNet funds have been earmarked to try that approach.

If maglev is built and trains on wheels prove efficient, the highly subsidized Coaster, as well as Amtrak and freight trains, could be headed toward a Third World country.

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At some point, you have to make an evolutionary leap. You have to throw away the manual Underwood and buy a sleek PC.

Shapery's vision may not be the exact shape of things to

come, but it's the most innovative strategy on the horizon. It offers hope, not variations on the old theme that has brought us to teeth-grinding gridlock.

It's nuts to consider a new airport in a virtual vacuum. The maglev project changes the dynamics of the debate. If Shapery's analysis is correct, an integrated SoCal airport system would reduce the net number of flights, significantly altering the economic doomsday scenarios surrounding the future of Lindbergh Field.

My personal pipe dream is an advisory proposition on the June 2006 ballot that would be worded something like this:

Would you support a public-private partnership to build a maglev rail system, suspended above major road arteries, linking San Diego's airports and freight terminals to airports and terminals in Orange County, Los Angeles and Ontario?

Until that pregnant question is publicly debated and answered, the airport will remain where it has been for a half-century.

Stuck in a holding pattern.

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