

Shanghai express

Public business should be paid by the public

Developer Sandor Shapery has a vision, and it's a good one: a privately financed, 270-mph magnetic levitation train linking San Diego's Lindbergh Field to Los Angeles International Airport.

Shapery, who built the downtown Emerald Plaza and other projects, and whose interest in maglev transportation technology goes back more than 20 years, believes in his vision. Last year he formed a non-profit company to promote it. And he has been an ardent supporter of it as a member of the Greater San Diego Chamber of Commerce and its Infrastructure Committee. He helped arrange for a demonstration of the world's first commercial maglev train, in Shanghai, during a coming chamber-organized trade mission to China.

No problems there; would that more citizens were so interested, so visionary, so activist.

Shapery's pursuit of the super train idea took him to the San Diego Association of Governments, the regional planning agency whose 19-member board of directors includes elected officials representing the county and its 18 cities. According to officials, Shapery offered to bankroll a trip for all nine members of SANDAG's Transportation Committee if they wanted to hook up with the chamber group for the Shanghai leg of the trip next month.

And here's where it gets messy.

Gary Gallegos, executive director of SANDAG, said agency attorneys studied the matter and determined there could be problems with the state's open-meetings law if a majority or more of the Transportation Committee members

were to go, and potential conflict problems if Shapery were to pay their expenses. Instead, Gallegos said, it was decided that if SANDAG representatives go it would be "at no cost to the taxpayer" and that the chamber would foot the bill.

Mitch Mitchell, a spokesman for the chamber, tells it differently. He said that the expenses for each member of the chamber delegation would be paid either by the member or the member's company and that the chamber itself would pay expenses only for its president, Jessie Knight, and perhaps one other person. He said the chamber would not be paying for SANDAG representatives, though he acknowledged that county Supervisor Ron Roberts, a member of SANDAG's Transportation Committee, had signed up for the full chamber trip and that it was possible his expenses would be covered by one of the chamber's business members.

So just who would be paying for which public officials seems a bit of a mystery.

We'd like to clear it up.

The maglev transportation technology is wonderfully intriguing in its possibilities for San Diego County. It's certainly worth the chamber's attention while its delegation is in China.

It may well be worth it for SANDAG officials, too. And we appreciate SANDAG's concern for conserving its public dollars. But the public's business must not only be conducted in public, but without the taint of possible conflict from freebies, whether from an individual or an organization. If this trip is worth doing, it's worth doing at public expense.