

High speed rail's future is private



Photo courtesy of Inland Energy

An artist's rendering shows the possible atrium of the DesertXpress project that will link Victorville and Las Vegas via a dedicated train schedule.

DesertXpress betting that Victorville-Vegas project will pave the way

[TATIANA PROPHET](#) Staff Writer

VICTORVILLE — Just as the governor is looking to slash public funding for a bullet train from Sacramento to San Diego, developers of a shorter train from Victorville to Las Vegas are betting that purely private money will be the key to getting their project built.

"We don't want any money from the public," said Tony Penna, vice president of Inland Energy, a development partner on the DesertXpress project.

The \$3.5 billion needed to build the 125 mph train will come from private investors, many of them international, said Tom Stone, president of DesertXpress.

"There's a keen interest in the international community in investing in long-term infrastructure projects in North America," said Stone, based in Las Vegas.

Willem cqSutherland, ING's head of infrastructure finance for the Americas, said infrastructure can be a solid investment.

"In general, international investors are all over infrastructure because it's basically a long-term investment, which if things go well can offer a long-term stable return," said Sutherland, who is not involved in the high-speed train project but has visited Victorville to take a closer look at its intermodal hub-in-the-making.

He added that the project still must prove its chance of success for investors to want to jump on board.

With traffic expected to increase by 60 percent on Interstate 15 by 2030, Stone sees demand for another form of transportation as practically a guarantee.

"There's this captive demand having to drive across the desert," he said. "And because being able to stop it in Victorville avoids the massive costs and delays associated with taking it into the L.A. Basin."

Victorville is about 90 miles by road from Los Angeles. Eventually, the line could be extended south to L.A., but Stone wants to make sure the train gets built first without the cost associated with going over the San Bernardino Mountains that separate Victorville from L.A.

With a project he believes is viable, Stone said DesertXpress can pave the way for future projects to come on line with both private and public funding.

"We believe that people in the United States are going to need to see first-hand how

convenient and fast and reliable this kind of high-speed rail system would be before there would be a commitment in California or any other state to put massive amounts of tax revenue into it," he said.

Stone would not comment on whether Las Vegas resorts were investing in the project. But they are definitely on board with the concept, he said.

"Victorville becomes an extension of Las Vegas, so that the resorts are offering a seamless experience to their guests at the train station," he said. "So you get your room key just like you get in Las Vegas, you get your bag taken care of, and for those who would like it, a drink ticket on the train. And they've all said it's a great idea and they want to be involved in making that happen."

Funding: \$3.5 billion of private investment

Technology: Steel-wheel-on-rails

Power: Diesel-electric

Miles covered: 190

Fare: \$55 one way

Schedule: Running every hour

Speed: 125 miles per hour

Timetable: A draft EIS should be ready in late 2007. Opening day is projected for 2012.

Tatiana Prophet may be reached at 951-6222 or at tprophet@vvdailypress.com.