

Climate change imperils Southern California's coastal rail corridor, panelists say

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Climate change is "wreaking havoc" on the coastal rail corridor from Santa Barbara to San Diego, Sen. Catherine Blakespear said at a Senate Transportation Subcommittee meeting in San Clemente.

Landslides and cliff collapses have periodically stopped the trains in Del Mar and San Clemente, and many other places also need improvements and protection from sea-level rise along the 351-mile Los Angeles-San Diego-San Luis Obispo corridor.

"There is much to be optimistic for, but ... much that needs to be done," Blakespear said at the subcommittee's meeting of elected officials and transportation experts. The committee is focusing on the implementation of Senate Bill 677 for new research to assess the effects of [climate change](#) on the rail corridor.

The cost of improvements proposed to make the system safer, faster and easier to use would be more than \$20 billion, according to a December 2023 report by Senate researchers.

Investments in rail transportation will take cars off the road, lower greenhouse gases, and move people and goods more efficiently, Blakespear said. However, the work is expensive and requires the cooperation of many agencies, which at times has been difficult.

The so-called LOSSAN corridor between San Diego and San Luis Obispo has seven different right-of-way owners, three different passenger carriers and two different freight carriers.

"We have a very complicated situation here," said Genvieve Giuliano of the Sol Price School of Public Policy at the University of Southern California.

For one thing, she said, there is no good model for regional

transportation systems. Long-distance travel is well-served, for example, by aviation. Local transportation in [large cities](#) has efficient metropolitan systems.

"We don't have that in the middle, say 50 miles to 300 miles," Giuliano said. "There is no actual model that has been developed for this kind of corridor."

Freight remains a small, but critical part of rail transportation, she said. However, freight and passengers are carried by different companies, which makes it difficult to coordinate activities within the corridor.

LOSSAN is a small joint powers authority with no power over its members, which include the North County Transit District, the Orange County Transportation Authority and the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

A short-term fix could be to give LOSSAN more authority to standardize things such as fares and schedules across its members, Giuliano said.

A more long-term solution she suggested was to create a single statewide agency that would fully integrate the multiple agencies that provide the separate passenger services—Amtrak, Coaster and Metrolink.

Several speakers emphasized the need for more frequent and reliable passenger service like that available in many Asian and European countries.

"If you want people to get out of a car, you need to find a way that makes it convenient, efficient and fast," said Sen. Janet Nguyen, R-Huntington Beach.

People are unlikely to ride the train if it takes them two hours to get someplace they could drive in 30 minutes, she said. Rail service needs to be frequent, convenient and inexpensive to ride.

Several people opposed making [large investments](#) in rail service, and especially the billions of dollars needed for proposals to reroute the tracks away from the beach and bluffs in San Clemente and Del Mar.

Dan Quirk, who identified himself as "a Del Mar City Council member speaking on my own behalf," said the low ridership does not justify the large investment of taxpayer money.

Government agencies are "courting dramatic risk ... by using false and misleading statements" such as the frequently heard statistic that the LOSSAN corridor is the second-busiest in the nation.

Quirk and others have pointed out that some light rail services in large U.S. cities, such as the Metropolitan Transit System trolley in San Diego, have more riders than the intercity passenger corridors.

Quirk and his identical twin brother, Steve Quirk, who also spoke Wednesday, have formed a nonprofit to promote abandoning the rail line between San Diego and San Clemente and turning it into a bicycle and pedestrian trail.

Most transportation experts and elected officials say the idea of abandoning the railway is impossible because of its small but vital role in passenger, freight and military transportation. The corridor is part of the Defense Department's Strategic Rail Corridor Network, which links military bases across the country.

Other speakers said a more practical solution would be to keep the tracks where they are and protect them by restoring the eroded beaches.

"The sandy beach buffer has historically protected the San Clemente tracks," said John Dow, a member of the local group Save Our Beaches. He said sand retention projects should be part of any plan to protect the coastal corridor.

Local, state and federal agencies have invested billions of dollars in the railroad, ridership is increasing, and it remains a vital part of the transportation infrastructure, the panelists said.

"We can't shut down this corridor," said Sarah Catz, a researcher at the University of California, Irvine's Institute of Transportation Studies. "It's just way too important. It's critical that we keep ... freight alive, and that we keep passenger service alive."

Investments in [rail](#) service create jobs, boost the economy, drive community growth and mitigate climate change, said Amy Peake of the Rebuild SoCal Partnership, a group that represents contractors and labor unions.

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