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EDITORIAL

Going Nowhere Really Fast

May 13, 2005

"Magnetic levitation." The phrase evokes both spirituality and science fiction, like transcendental meditation mixed with supersonic transportation. Perhaps that explains the almost messianic zeal of its supporters, who think it is the public transit savior come to deliver us from clattering trains and lead us not into gridlock.

The long-running debate over "maglev" trains is a battle between faith and reason. Converts believe magnetic levitation — which uses magnetic force to lift cars just above the tracks, allowing speeds of more than 300 mph — is one of the greatest inventions since the wheel. They have to rely on faith because there is very little evidence of the practicality of these systems. Only one commercial high-speed maglev train exists, covering a 19-mile stretch from Shanghai to Pudong International Airport.

Arguing from reason are those who concede that maglev is a nifty technology but recognize that such systems are spectacularly expensive — \$80 million a mile to construct, by some estimates. Why spend so much money, especially if it's from taxpayers, when you might get more bang for the buck out of cheaper alternatives?

California has spent millions studying a bullet train from San Diego to Sacramento, a proposal that has languished for 12 years. The Southern California Assn. of Governments has proposed a maglev system to connect the region's airports. But it's indicative of the visionary, if slightly off-kilter, nature of maglev supporters that the least practical proposal in the West may now have the best chance to become reality.

A federal transportation bill that includes funding for maglev has passed in the House and awaits a vote in the Senate. There are three finalists for \$950 million, one of which is a 40-mile hop from Las Vegas to Primm, Nev., on the California border. Primm is the home of an outlet mall and a big roller coaster. Beyond that, there's no there there.

The Vegas-to-Primm route is envisioned as the first leg of a system that would eventually run all the way to Anaheim. But for that to happen, California would have to agree to build the rest of the line — and the state already rejected that idea more than a decade ago. Las Vegas boosters somehow managed to keep a straight face while claiming that the Vegas-to-Primm line would make \$50 million in annual profits. Ask the folks at Amtrak whether trains that go from somewhere to nowhere make that kind of money.

That the Primm line has gotten this far is a tribute to the power and determination of the Senate minority leader, Harry Reid of Nevada, who undoubtedly sees maglev as promising a new transportation system for pork. Maglev is an interesting technology that bears watching, especially if ways can be found to reduce the cost. But there is no urgent need for a bullet train from Sin City to Disneyland, let alone to Primm.

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