

March 26, 2026

SB 1098 Working Group <via email only LOSSAN.SB1098@calsta.ca.gov>

RE: March 27, 2026 SB 1098 Working Group Meeting

Working Group Members,

The undersigned represent rail riders, environmentalists, transit advocates, and urbanists throughout Southern California.

We know that the LOSSAN Rail Corridor is critical for linking the Southern California regional economy, providing connectivity to residents and reducing VMT. We also know that Metrolink and NCTD's Coaster provide similar intra-regional mobility and economic benefits.

LOSSAN Service Optimization Study (2022), SCORE (2017) and State Rail Plan (2024) lay out a clear vision for increasing service, reliability and trip speeds to attract more riders. If California can implement these plans, LOSSAN's Surfliner and NCTD's Coaster service has the potential to run bidirectional service at 4 trains per hour from early morning to late at night. Similarly Metrolink can increase capacity to provide a base layer of two trains per hour service throughout the network.

This is an opportunity for Southern California to have one of the best passenger rail networks in the country if adequate investments are made to run trains frequently and reliably all day. The Los Angeles to San Diego corridor has some of the strongest market potential for intercity rail in the United States. Reducing travel times between those cities could make trains the premiere travel option, reducing freeway traffic, and expanded service north of Los Angeles could improve connectivity with Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo. To further realize this potential, existing commuter rail run by Metrolink and NCTD must become frequent "regional" rail and connect seamlessly to intercity services like the Surfliner, with trains coming at least every 15 minutes. Slow and polluting diesel locomotives should be replaced with electric trains powered by overhead catenary wires, a proven solution for achieving zero-emissions operation.

There are dozens of proposed projects in the works that could reduce travel times, save trackage from erosion, and improve reliability. However, responsible agencies have been slow to deliver. Partially, this is due to a lack of an overarching regional vision but in many cases, it is because of fractured infrastructure ownership between several county agencies. In some cases, high-profile local transit projects or freeway expansion projects have been the main focus of these agencies, taking away resources from regional rail. The Link Union Station project, which would provide additional capacity and several minutes of time savings by constructing run-through tracks (think LA's Regional Connector but for regional rail), has been stalled for years as it is a highly complex project. In other cases, agencies have been deterred from progress by hyper local opposition. Orange County Transportation Authority's (OCTA) Serra Siding Extension project would allow more frequent trains through a bottleneck near San Clemente and Dana Point, but it has been stalled due to hyperlocal complaints about the project. The same happened to LA Metro's Raymer to Bernson Double Track project, which would have increased Surfliner and Metrolink service north of Los Angeles by providing much-needed capacity between Chatsworth and Van Nuys.

Under the status quo, if every county but one delivers on the necessary projects in its borders to unlock great service, then the cumulative service benefits cannot be achieved. Most other countries do not manage rail infrastructure in this way. We shouldn't do so in California.

Recommendations – The Organization

Ideally, there would be one major agency for all intercity and regional rail in Southern California, with control over its own infrastructure, ample funding for frequent operations, and permanent staff focused on improvement projects. The goals of the organization should be to provide the highest quality service and highest ridership regional rail service for the greater Southern California region.

Recommendations – The Board

The Board needs to be independent and operate at arm's length from the political bodies that appoint Board Members to assure a regional perspective and isolation from the hyper-local pressure that stalls projects of regional importance. It is equally important for the board to consist of a mix of those appointed for their history of public service and those with the necessary skills to oversee the activities of the new agency's staff. Board membership should be diverse with political appointees serving alongside those with professional expertise in management, finance, labor relations, transportation, etc. In addition, there should be Board Members representing customers and labor.

Recommendations – Funding

Existing funding sources (local, state, and federal) must continue to flow and ideally should be bolstered to the regional agency. To fulfill the long-term opportunity of the corridor, developing a dedicated region-wide funding stream for ongoing capital projects and operations funding should be a priority. Moreover, this agency should be able to levy taxes and issue bonds for the sake of capital and operational costs.

Additionally, the State of California should consider revising its capital investment in transit and intercity rail to align with global and domestic best practices. The current practice of the Transit and Intercity Rail Capital Program is to “slice salami thin” and distribute many partial discretionary grants to many categories of projects. The practical effect of this program design is that applicants spend much of their energy and time patching together disparate grants trying to stay ahead of construction inflation. As a result, after ten years the Transit and Intercity Rail Capital Program has awarded \$10bn to projects but only \$2bn has been allocated as projects have not completed their funding packages. The practical result is California is losing purchasing power and value for transit and intercity rail investment.

The United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Norway, New York, Massachusetts, Illinois, and Utah all use multi-year framework agreements to renew and enhance railways. These framework agreements provide project sponsors with project planning certainty by fully funding project funding gaps. Framework agreements also prioritize a race-to-the-top attitude as projects must show a higher benefit/cost score to enter into a framework agreement and must retain an adequate score to secure construction dollars.¹

¹ <https://calelectricrail.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/AgainstPatchWorkFunding-CER-June25.pdf>.

The SB 1098 WG should consider how revised transit and intercity rail capital funding programs can support service-led planning and delivery of service in Southern California.

Recommendations – Structure

The new agency could be a new state agency led by a single county with other counties represented on the state agency's board. Alternatively, it could be a stand-alone Joint Powers Authority with all county assets owned collectively. Another option would be to organize the agency like a terminal railroad with each county owning shares in the railroad. Regardless of specific structure, we caution against marble layer cake governance with too many veto actors whose incentives are often hyper-local rather than regional and in the best interests of rail governance.

Recommendations – Management, Operations and Capital Projects

The new Southern California Regional Rail entity should be organized solely as a railroad, independent of member counties and large enough to support a robust management team responsible for a wide range of management and oversight. Importantly, the new entity needs to develop and invest in an extensive and permanent staff, giving it a high level of expertise for both operations and capital projects reflective of its long-term goals. The management and board would have direct control over its capital budget, project priorities, and construction. The entity could directly operate all or some of its trains or franchise out all or some of its operations. Whatever the preference, it will have some operating agreements with other rail companies including Amtrak, BNSF, Union Pacific, CAHSR, and freight shortlines.

To the extent the new entity lacks design, engineering or construction management resources, the State of California should consider designating Caltrans as the primary agency for preconstruction and construction services for Southern California rail network renewals and enhancements – in the same manner Caltrans would perform work for a local road or bridge project.

Recommendations – Right-of-Way and Track

Because of the legal complexities, the reality is that some track and right-of-way is owned by counties and freight railroads. Consolidating regional rail governance into a single entity increases collective leverage and capacity to engage with freights - increasing potential for favorable outcomes like increased passenger slots and lower-cost capital projects. Operating agreements with the freight railroads will continue, however county-owned properties could be held collectively within the new entity. The only exception might be Los Angeles Union Station, which because of its acquisition history and development potential for LA Metro, is very complex. A lease of the assets required for the agency's operations may be an option. This would ensure that the Southern California Regional operator has rights to improve right of way with its capital projects, and increase service levels, without a county veto.

Electrification with overhead catenary, including on mainlines owned by Class I railroads, needs to be championed by regional governments or the new rail authority.² Not only will it reduce the harmful effects of diesel pollution on citizens, electrification infrastructure can be shared by both passenger and freight trains. Passenger ridership has proven around the world to greatly increase following electrification, due to increased speed, frequency (in part due to lower operation and maintenance costs), reliability, and passenger comfort from less noise and no smoke. Caltrain is a

² <https://calelectricrail.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/electrolink-final-final.pdf>.

prime example of this, with overall ridership up 57% one year after electrification, the fastest growing transit agency in the country.

Different models of ownership (such as publicly-owned electrification infrastructure over tracks that are privately-owned per the LA-Fullerton electrification proposed by CAHSR on the BNSF-owned section of LOSSAN) and capital project financing need to be explored. The substantial amount of public direct investment in freight rail track capacity already (on both public and privately owned track, such as port-area rail projects and adding a third track on the BNSF mainline through Hesperia) has provided substantial public benefits for Southern California.

We thank you for your consideration and look forward to working with you on modernizing Southern California's rail network.

Sincerely,

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