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[Leaders want line to go past downtown San Diego](#)

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By Steve Schmidt

South Bay leaders want the state agency cooking up plans for a high-speed rail system in California to head for the border.

The massive public-works project – still very much on the drawing board – is expected to link the state's biggest cities via trains traveling as fast as 220 mph.

Current plans call for the south terminus of the system to be at the Santa Fe Depot in downtown San Diego. But a growing number of South Bay business leaders and elected officials want the line to end at the U.S.-Mexico border, saying that would ease travel and improve trade.

“That linkage would be invaluable,” said Chula Vista Councilman Jerry Rindone, a member of the Metropolitan Transit System board.

State voters last month approved a \$10 billion bond measure to jump-start development of the electric-powered system that backers expect to cost as much as \$45 billion. The California High-Speed Rail Authority is seeking federal and private-sector funding to cover the difference.

Board Chairman Quentin Kopp, a former state senator, said a border stop is worth looking into, noting the system is still in the planning stage.

Construction on the initial part of the system – the critical Los-Angeles-to-San-Francisco leg – is expected to start as soon as 2011.

Kopp noted that recent state legislation capped the number of stations at 24. The authority Web site lists at least 25 possible stops, including Sacramento, San Francisco, Fresno, Los Angeles, Riverside and Murrieta.

Kopp said having too many stops would undercut the system's main selling point – speed. As envisioned, a San Diego-to-San Francisco trek would take less than four hours.

“Obviously, you don't have a high-speed system if you have a proliferation of stations,” Kopp said.

Cindy Gompper-Graves, chief executive officer of the South County Economic Development Council, thinks running the rail to the border would have a positive ripple effect on the region and beyond.

“It's imperative to us that the train continue to South County and not just stop in San Diego,” Gompper-Graves said. “We see it as an engine for economic growth.”

Backers of a South Bay station, perhaps in the San Ysidro or Otay Mesa areas, say it would ease traffic and trade along one of the nation's busiest border crossings.

“Economically, it makes a lot of sense,” said Jim Janney, mayor of Imperial Beach.

Gompper-Graves favors connecting the system to a possible cross-border airport terminal and perhaps running it parallel to state routes 905 and 125.

At a South County economic council gathering last week, a rail authority manager outlined plans for the system.

The authority will spend much of the next two years trying to raise federal and private-sector money for the project – a task made easier by last month's passage of Proposition 1A, Kopp said.

He thinks the prospect of securing federal funding is gaining ground, noting that President-elect Barack Obama and others are talking about pumping more money into public-works projects to prop up the faltering economy.

The federal government also has set aside specific funds to help pay for high-speed rail systems.

At the same time, authority officials say there is great interest within the private sector to invest in the project. Private companies have played a central role in building and operating bullet trains in France and other nations.

Some transit experts have voiced skepticism about the ability of the authority to attract public and private money, especially given the sagging economy.

Meanwhile, the authority is talking with South Bay officials, the San Diego Association of Governments and other agencies about possible station locations.

The authority Web site lists three possible stops in San Diego County – Escondido, University City and the Santa Fe Depot. The local leg of the system is expected to connect to Riverside, with much of it running parallel to Interstate 15.

SANDAG and Lindbergh Field officials also have raised the prospect of an airport stop.

Jose Martinez, a regional manager with the authority, said airport and border stations are both worth serious consideration. Martinez said it is unlikely the system would include a stop at the airport and downtown San Diego, given their close proximity.

Martinez said he is in contact with other regions of Southern California that have raised the idea of stations, but that interest seems particularly high in the South Bay.

The authority plans to formally identify stations by the middle of next year.