

# California Transit Update

*By John Benson*

*April 2026*

## 1. Introduction

Although your author rarely exits the Livermore Valley, and never uses the SF Bay Area's massive public transit systems, being a former daily commuter (now retired), I understand how important these systems are to commuters in my metro-area. Thus, I continue to write updates for these. This is that update.

My last post of this subject was about six months ago, and is summarized and linked below.

***California High-Speed Rail's New Proposal:*** *It's been a while since I wrote about my home-state's project to link our three largest metropolitan regions (SF Bay Area, Los Angeles and San Diego) with a California High-Speed Rail System (hereafter HSR) while connecting through many other major cities in the Central Valley, Inland Empire and Orange County. See the map in Section 2 of this paper for details.*

*My last update of this project was three years ago, but in defense of my tardiness, HSR has been making steady progress in building out the central part of the system, while transit districts in the SF Bay Area and Southern California have made progress on building bridging sections...*

<https://www.energycentral.com/energy-biz/post/california-high-speed-rail-s-new-proposal-K7bXNcU0WSufzbK>

Starting-Point Sources:

California High Speed Rail Completes Major Milestone,

Mar 25, 2026

<https://www.newsweek.com/california-high-speed-rail-completes-major-milestone-11732914>

BART rejected this \$2 billion train line. Now its backers want to build it anyway,

April 8, 2026

[https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/bart-rejected-2-billion-train-120000464.html?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuYmluZy5jb20v&guc e\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAJooNOh4jb19VnGBmn0rmotB8ACgzKMAWce2IhbI3a5cmWLFRCwodxexUS0qIFTx3L3OWbsl9t005yl1xS-6fr6ujaUjZk6PKI7vTjrmkpdoAKWlv3-eMchklJBnT3U3CDMqhn7uq2W4rqub9RWvx42CdQR-RXiqk6I7k0I0XW](https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/bart-rejected-2-billion-train-120000464.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuYmluZy5jb20v&guc e_referrer_sig=AQAAAJooNOh4jb19VnGBmn0rmotB8ACgzKMAWce2IhbI3a5cmWLFRCwodxexUS0qIFTx3L3OWbsl9t005yl1xS-6fr6ujaUjZk6PKI7vTjrmkpdoAKWlv3-eMchklJBnT3U3CDMqhn7uq2W4rqub9RWvx42CdQR-RXiqk6I7k0I0XW)

Valley Link Rail Project, Document Library

<https://www.getvalleylinked.com/>

## 2. Livermore

The section title city has been my home-town since 1977. Since I officially retired in 2013, it has also been my business address, and where I write the articles my readers see on Energy Central. It is the largest city in the Livermore Valley (a.k.a. Tri-Valley) with a population of approximately 90,000. Livermore has been growing rapidly lately via a major build-out of condos and apartments. The entire Livermore Valley (a.k.a. Livermore-Pleasanton-Dublin Urban Area) had a population of a bit over 240,000 in 2020, but I expect it's now well over 250,000 because all three cities have been growing (also with many condos and apartments). Because BART and ACE are major commuter networks that run through the Livermore Valley, it is a really good location for commuters to live. Oh yes, this valley is also an American Viticultural Area.

*Livermore Valley is an American Viticultural Area (AVA) in Alameda County, California, centered around the city of Livermore in the Tri-Valley region which is composed of Amador, San Ramon, and Livermore valleys. The valley was named by Robert Livermore, an 19th-century landowner whose holdings encompassed the area and who planted the first grapevines in the region. The appellation was established as the nation's nineteenth, the state's thirteenth and the county's initial AVA on September 1, 1982 by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), Treasury after reviewing the petition submitted by fifteen Livermore Valley vintners and growers proposing a viticultural area in Alameda County named "Livermore Valley."<sup>1</sup>*

Since your author (and I would guess many of our commuters) are fond of the fermented grape beverage, this makes for a short drive to the nearest winery. As of 2025, there are about 50 wineries in the Livermore Valley (see, plenty of the fermented beverage to go around). See the map below.



<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Livermore\\_Valley\\_AVA](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Livermore_Valley_AVA)

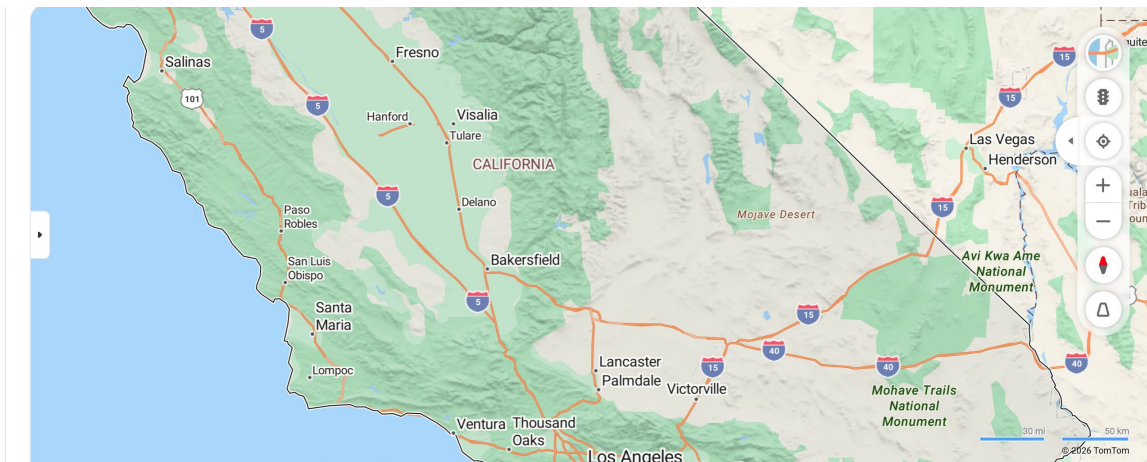
Now that I've wondered completely off of the subject of this paper, I will start over.

### 3. California High Speed Rail, Major Hub

*California's long-delayed high-speed rail project has reached a key turning point, completing a major construction hub that clears the way for track installation to begin.<sup>2</sup>*

*Newsweek reached out to the California High Speed Rail Authority via email for comment.*

*Less than a year after construction began, crews have completed work on a sprawling 150-acre railhead facility in Kern County, just south of Wasco. See the map below. Wasco is just north of Bakersfield.*



*The site is designed to act as the logistical nerve center for California's high-speed rail build, receiving, storing and distributing the massive materials needed to lay track and install electrified systems.*

*A total of six rail lines now feed directly into the facility, allowing steel rails, concrete ties and electrical components to arrive by train rather than truck.*

*Officials say the setup will streamline construction as the project enters its next and most complex phase.*

*For years, California's high-speed rail has been criticized as more vision than reality.*

*With the hub operational, materials can finally be staged for track-laying along the Central Valley corridor, where much of the early construction is concentrated.*

*State officials frame the moment as proof the project is moving beyond blueprints and environmental reviews.*

*Speaking on February 3, 2026 on a visit to California High-Speed Rail Authority's Southern Railhead Facility in Kern County, California, Governor Gavin Newsom said: "We have got this site now all prepped and ready to go. We have got these six lines that are coming in connecting the ability to bring all these materials together and bring hundreds and hundreds of workers here."*

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/california-high-speed-rail-completes-major-milestone-11732914>

*He added in a news release: "With the completion of the Southern Railhead Facility, we've taken another critical step in the track-laying stage. California is building the nation's first high-speed rail system, and we're proving it can be done. We're laying the foundation for cleaner, faster, and more connected transportation while investing in communities and creating good-paying jobs. California isn't waiting for the future. We're building it."*

*California Transportation Secretary Toks Omishakin said: "This milestone underscores the progress California is making by moving from planning to implementation. With track installation now within reach, completing the railhead puts real momentum behind the work ahead. It's tangible progress—building infrastructure that connects communities, supports a cleaner transportation future, and brings high-speed rail closer to service."*

*California High-Speed Rail Authority CEO Ian Choudri said: "This major milestone reflects the work happening on the ground and a delivery approach focused on partnerships with the Governor and Legislature."*

*"The railhead facility is a critical step in the track-installation process and keeps us on pace to deliver this system smarter, faster and more economically. With procurements underway on laying of electrified track and systems, including new and innovative pathways opening for private sector investment, we're building the foundation for long-term success and continued momentum."<sup>3</sup>*

### **3.1. Next Steps**

*With the railhead complete, attention now turns to the start of track installation in the Central Valley and the broader question of funding the system's future phases.*

*Lawmakers and rail officials are weighing changes to state law as they seek private investment to help finance expansion beyond the initial segment, a debate that is likely to intensify as construction advances and political scrutiny continues.*

### **3.2. Recent Update**

*Rep. Vince Fong, a Republican representing California's Central Valley, sits on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. He says that when California voters first approved high-speed rail, the promise and price tag were more of a marketing campaign than a realistic projection.<sup>4</sup>*

*"We're now in 2026. There are no trains. There's no track laid," he said. "It was a complete bait and switch."*

*It became clear after voters approved the plan in 2008 that the specifics hadn't been worked out, Fong said. California Secretary of Transportation Toks Omishakin, who's relatively new to the job — agrees with that point. He's been left to answer for his predecessors.*

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<sup>3</sup> The California High-Speed Rail System is designed to travel at speeds of up to 220 mph (350 km/h), making it one of the fastest train systems in the world. The initial phase aims to connect San Francisco and Los Angeles in under three hours, with a total length of 494 miles.

<sup>4</sup> By Jon Wertheim, David M. Levine, Meghan Lisson, 60 Minutes Overtime, April 5, 2026, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-high-speed-rail-60-minutes/>

*To get the necessary political buy-in from the whole state, the plan called for the train to run inland, threading the farmland of the Central Valley. But at the time, the California High-Speed Rail Authority hadn't answered basic questions, like precisely where it could lay down its tracks, the public and private property the route would traverse — what's known as right of way.*

*So far, the state has had to negotiate roughly 3,000 parcels of land to run its train through the Central Valley leg, Omishakin<sup>5</sup> said.*

*California's environmental regulations have also slowed the process. Those regulations have triggered years-long reviews, lawsuits and delays — which, combined with the relatively high cost of labor and construction in the U.S., have added to the price tag.*

*While the federal government made modest contributions to the project under the Obama and Biden administrations, the financial burden fell chiefly on California, and when construction started, the state didn't have the financing to complete the full route.*

*In 2019, with costs increasing and the timeline off schedule, political pressure mounted.*

*"Right now, there simply isn't a path to get from Sacramento to San Diego, let alone from San Francisco to L.A.," Gov. Gavin Newsom, who inherited the project, said at the time.*

*Under Newsom, who didn't respond to repeated interview requests, California decided to focus on completing that initial Central Valley segment. It's a route few are likely to ride, according to the Rail Authority's own projections. The ultimate goal remains connecting northern and southern California...*

*Today, more than 20 countries — largely in Europe and Asia — have high-speed rail, generally defined as cruising at 150 miles per hour or more. In Africa, Morocco has a train traveling at a top speed of nearly 200 miles an hour. And Egypt has broken ground on a high-speed rail line.<sup>3</sup>*

*Lou Thompson, who sat on the state's high-speed rail peer review group, said "failure is always an option. The simple answer is they've decided they want to do it and pay for it, and we haven't," Thompson said.*

### **3.3. Can a Private Company Make High-speed Rail Work?**

*Brightline, a private company, says it can achieve what California hasn't. In 2018, it opened a train between Miami and Orlando that hits top speeds of 125 miles an hour. While it's not a high-speed rail, it's a beta test for Brightline's next project: a bullet train connecting L.A. and Las Vegas in just 2 hours. It's a trip that can take five hours by car.*

*"Brightline West will be true high-speed rail, first time in the country," Mike Reininger, managing director of Brightline West, said. "And we'll operate at speeds of about 200 miles an hour maximum."*

*Brightline is avoiding complicated right-of-way issues out west by running on the median of the I-15 highway. Construction has already begun on some of the station structures. The plan is to start service in late 2029.*

*The company says building out west will also avoid the tragedy that has plagued the south Florida route, where trains run at street level, through crowded neighborhoods. In the near-decade since operations began, more than 200 people have been hit and killed by Brightline trains, according to the Miami Herald and local public radio station WLRN. It will be safer out west, the company says, where train crossings won't be at street level.*

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<sup>5</sup> California Transportation Secretary Toks Omishakin

*But there are also the finances. In Florida, stratospheric costs of building and running the rail line vastly outstrip revenues. Analysts have downgraded Brightline's debt to junk, raising questions about private rail as a business.*

*Brightline West has already received some federal funding and is hoping for a \$6 billion loan from the Trump administration.*

*Omishakin<sup>5</sup> said the California High-Speed Rail Authority believes it can complete the Central Valley segment without money from the federal government, but that the full route from L.A. to San Francisco would be challenging without it.*

*Lou Thompson<sup>6</sup> says large infrastructure projects like these require consistent, stable funding that only the federal government can provide, much like it did for the interstate highway system 70 years ago. Plus, he says, "a lot of the benefits of the project, the reason why you build a project, is public — pollution reduction, congestion reduction, improved safety, comfort — all of those things are public benefits."*

#### **4. Back in the Livermore Valley**

*BART will never go to Livermore. So, Tri-Valley officials are determined to build their own train.<sup>7</sup>*

*They envision a railway of hybrid, hydrogen battery trains that would whisk people along tracks dug into the median of Interstate 580. Valley Link would start at Vasco Road in Livermore, picking up passengers from Altamont Corridor Express, or ACE, trains that chug in from the Central Valley. From there, it would zip to Dublin-Pleasanton BART Station, creating a pipeline to the central Bay Area. In a few years' time, the small battery-powered rail could run deeper into San Joaquin County, serving super-commuters who currently slog through traffic over the Altamont Pass (see image below).*



<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cahsrprg.com/louis-s-thompson/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/bart-rejected-2-billion-train-120000464.html?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuYmluZy5jb20v&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAJooNOh4jb19VnGBbmn0rmotB8ACgzKMAWce2Ihbl3a5cmWLFRCwodxexUS0gIFTx3L3OWbsl9t005yI1xS-6fr6ujaUjZk6PK17vTjrmkpdoAKWiv3-eMchkelJBnT3U3CDMqhn7uq2W4rgub9RWvx42CdQR-RXiql6l7k0l0XW](https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/bart-rejected-2-billion-train-120000464.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuYmluZy5jb20v&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAJooNOh4jb19VnGBbmn0rmotB8ACgzKMAWce2Ihbl3a5cmWLFRCwodxexUS0gIFTx3L3OWbsl9t005yI1xS-6fr6ujaUjZk6PK17vTjrmkpdoAKWiv3-eMchkelJBnT3U3CDMqhn7uq2W4rgub9RWvx42CdQR-RXiql6l7k0l0XW)

*With \$2 billion and a little faith, Valley Link could break ground in late 2028, transforming mobility in a booming corner of the Bay Area, said Kevin Sheridan, the project's executive director. At a moment when BART and other transit agencies are mired in budget crises, Sheridan and other Valley Link boosters brim with sunny optimism.*

*"What I feel is very unique about this project is it's actually creating the connection to bring not only more ridership to ACE but also BART," Sheridan said about the system that would be BART-adjacent. "That's an untapped market. We are not expanding a service; we are creating a service to bring new riders."*

*But many observers are wary. In their quest to secure more than \$1 billion in federal and state funding to build Valley Link's first phase, Tri-Valley and Central Valley leaders would have to compete for grant money with other long-pined-for transportation needs, including BART to downtown San Jose and the extension of Caltrain and future high-speed rail into downtown San Francisco. It would cost \$4 billion to complete Valley Link's full build-out, through Tracy and into Mountain House in western San Joaquin County.*

*Skeptics question whether this is really the moment to plan a new train, with existing transit services facing huge deficits.*

*"If there were unlimited funding for transit, it would be a different story," said former BART Board Director Rebecca Saltzman, who voted against the proposed \$2 billion Livermore BART extension in 2018. She has long advocated for rapid buses along I-580 as a cheaper and more flexible solution.*

*Politicians who represent that corridor say buses couldn't run enough service to accommodate new development blossoming along the interstate, or tech jobs spawning from Livermore National Laboratory. They have their hearts set on heavy commuter rail.*

*"We are one of the fastest growing counties in the state of California and you look at our freeway congestion, we have one of the worst freeway commutes here in California from the valley to the Bay Area," said San Joaquin County Supervisor Robert Rickman. He emphasized that a rapidly developing area cannot remain a transit desert. Saltzman noted that, for all their enthusiasm, San Joaquin County leaders had not been able to pass a transportation funding measure for their portion of the Valley Link project.*

*Livermore Mayor John Marchand said he has already appealed to leaders in Washington D.C., arguing that a new transit system could free up capacity for highway-freight on I-580 into and out of the Central Valley.*

*The dissension over Valley Link reflects a larger debate over how the Bay Area should grow. Urbanists, including many on the BART board, have argued that trains should run through downtowns where homes and industry are concentrated - not along freeways where stations function as "park-and-rides." By contrast, politicians in more suburban and rural areas, including the Tri-Valley, believe that if you build transportation infrastructure, the jobs and housing will come.*

*Initially, Valley Link would comprise three stations, dipping west from the ACE platform on Vasco Road, to a stop at Isabel Avenue near the freeway, before terminating at Dublin/Pleasanton Station, where riders could switch to BART and head toward Oakland or San Francisco's Financial District. Note that ACE currently terminates in East San Jose, and is planned to go into Downtown San Jose.*

*That could mean two or three transfers between different rail systems on morning and evening commutes. And Sheridan believes people would do it. Sitting on a train with your laptop is highly preferable to sitting in traffic, he said. A seamless ride across three rail systems (ACE, Valley Link and BART) would shave off many minutes per trip compared with driving, Sheridan said.*

*Commuters who currently take the ACE train from Tracy or Livermore to jobs in Silicon Valley agree that it's superior to a soul-crushing car commute. Some wonder, however, if it might be smarter to invest the money toward beefing up ACE service instead.*

*"Personally, Valley Link wouldn't work for me," said Nick Mullen, who rides ACE from Livermore to Santa Clara and catches a shuttle to his office. He said many of his neighbors in the Tri-Valley take similar routes.*

*Joshua Dunn of Tracy said he would consider riding Valley Link if the train ever reached his city or nearby Mountain House. He drives over the Altamont Pass from Tracy to Livermore on days he has to be in the office. When traffic is flowing, he can make the 19-mile drive in 20 to 25 minutes. But it could be an hour-and-a-half slog during a heavy rush hour, or if a broken-down car clogs a lane.*

*Indeed, freeways have steadily grown more congested as more residents flock to the Central Valley. Tracy Mayor Dan Arriola said when he was a kid his dad would wake up at 3 a.m. to drive to Sunnyvale for a tech job and often didn't come home until the late evening. Now the trip would likely take longer and consist of more crawling and braking. Of 100,000 residents in Tracy, nearly 68% commute out of the city for work.*

*"Many of our residents are folks who were priced out of the Bay Area ... who come to the city of Tracy to live but their jobs are still in the Bay Area," Arriola said. "That's an everyday reality for our residents."*

*At least one top BART official adamantly supports the new train project. Melissa Hernandez, president of the agency's board, also chairs the Valley Link board. She contends that a BART-style commuter rail is critical to economic development in the Tri Valley. Hernandez is also running for the congressional seat soon to be vacated by Eric Swalwell.*

**Author's comment:** Hey Melissa, it's vacant. Eric has bigger issues.

*"Valley Link is a megaregional project that connects the Bay Area to San Joaquin County by creating a new direct rail connection between ACE and BART in Livermore as part of its initial phase," Hernandez wrote in a statement. "For over four decades Livermore has desired a transit rail connection to BART."*

*If successful, Sheridan said final design of the first segment would be completed by the end of 2027 with construction to start in 2028. By 2031, the new train could be open for business.*

**Final author's comments:** If you look at the winery map on page 2 of this paper, our major freeway, I-580, runs along the top. The Altamont Pass is on the upper right corner, and it is generally a mess during commute-hours.

The three towns in the Livermore Valley (Livermore, Pleasanton and Dublin), all have fairly tiny “downtowns” as compared to their suburbs’ areas, ditto the percentage of their respective populations that reside in downtowns. ACE goes through downtown Livermore, and downtown Pleasanton. Dublin doesn’t really have a clearly defined “downtown,” but I looked at a map of Dublin’s main business district, and didn’t see any rail-lines in the vicinity. This comment is in response to the paragraph on page 7 of this paper that starts out with “The dissension over Valley Link...”

The only stretch of highway between Livermore, CA and Tracy, CA is a 21-mile stretch of I-580 through the Altamont Pass, and yet a median 3-bedroom, 2-bathroom home in Livermore currently costs about \$1.16 Million, and the same home in Tracy costs about \$665,000. Thus, many families that are completely priced-out of Livermore, can afford a home in Tracy, and thus the willingness to put up with the commuter’s hell (a.k.a., the Altamont).