

Opinion: Tunnel or trail? Before spending \$4 billion tunneling through Del Mar, consider alternatives and do what's best.



The Coaster train along Del Mar's eroding bluff.

SANDAG's first step toward rail relocation should be a forward-looking benefit-cost analysis to identify the best alternative to the existing rail line. It may be a rail-to-trail conversion.

By Peter Cramton

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Del Mar bluff erosion makes the coastal rail line unsustainable. The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) has focused on one remedy: rail relocation, a venture estimated to take [twelve years](#) and cost [\\$4 billion](#). But is moving the rail worth the cost? To answer this question, SANDAG needs a forward-looking benefit-cost analysis—as the US Department of Transportation requires—to identify the best option to achieve our goals.

The alternatives evaluated should include the retirement of the rail line. The rail line is not essential. San Diego was not significantly affected when bluff collapse led to months-long train outages. Consider each rail line use: military, freight, and passenger train.

A spokesman for Camp Pendleton said that closure would have ["little to no impact"](#) because most military equipment is moved on trucks.

Regarding freight, the rail line moves [0.04%](#) of California's freight. Interstate 5 (I-5) could readily absorb this freight without increasing congestion. In the twelve years it would take to build a tunnel, vehicle

technology advances will significantly increase I-5 capacity, especially at night when self-driving trucks can platoon effectively.

The prominent use of the rail line is passenger trains. Yet passenger use has seen a steady decline since 2014. Today, there are only [4,500](#) daily passengers on the Del Mar segment. Thus, the \$4 billion cost translates to \$888,889 per daily rider, orders of magnitude more than any rider would be willing to pay.

One of the Coaster's glaring problems is equity. The train's tiny ridership caters to the highest-income residents in San Diego. [64%](#) of the Coaster's riders have incomes of \$75,000 or more, and [97%](#) own a car and typically drive their cars to the train station. There are many better opportunities to improve transit, especially for those with less income.

The economics become even more absurd when one recognizes the additional billions required for the tunneling in San Clemente for the train to reach Los Angeles.

But wouldn't the rail line reduce emissions and traffic congestion? Sadly, no. The diesel train is a source of noise, carbon, NOx, and particulate emissions. The train diverts 4,500 out of 1.3 million daily automobile trips, or 0.3% from I-5. A rail-to-trail conversion would move many more without emissions.

Transportation is undergoing a rapid transformation. These new technologies offer consumers better options. Better options displace rail. Transportation technologies most apt to displace passenger trains include e-bikes, e-scooters, and self-driving vehicles. The specific technologies adopted will depend on which technologies best serve consumers. Vibrant competition among these technologies will bring rapid gains in services at reduced cost.

These technologies will improve transportation efficiency. Congested highways can benefit from self-driving vehicles. Freeway capacity increases when self-driving vehicles, both passenger and freight, move cooperatively to maximize safe throughput.

Even before self-driving arrives, ridesharing and carpooling apps will continue to displace train passengers. These apps have the enormous advantage of doing what users want: moving from A to B. With trains, the user must get from A to the train station and then from another train station to B. This is a primary reason cars tend to dominate trains.

With retirement, the rail corridor can become a vibrant green passageway connecting communities up and down the coast. Today, countless walkers, runners, and bikers are moving along the coast. The demand is proven.

Rails-to-trails have a long history of success in urban areas. They have been shown to improve public health, boost economic development, and connect communities. Here are a few examples. The High Line in New York City is a 1.45-mile-long elevated park built on a former freight rail line; it is now one of the most popular tourist destinations in New York City. The Riverwalk in San Antonio, Texas, is a 15-mile-long pedestrian and bicycle trail along the San Antonio River; it is a popular tourist destination and a significant economic driver. The Emerald Necklace in Boston, Massachusetts, is a system of parks and parkways; it includes several rails-to-trails, including the Charles River Bike Path and the Esplanade. These rail-to-trail conversions harness the natural beauty of the setting. The same—in abundance—would be true in San Diego.

Passenger train usage has declined in recent years because people have better options. This trend will continue in the years ahead as new technologies bring ever-better options. A rail-to-trail pathway would move more people along our beautiful coast at a fraction of the expense and bring joy to all who use it. Let's move to the future and not tunnel to maintain the past.