

SANDAG advances plan for Del Mar train tunnel. 'This is a momentous day'

State grant of \$300 million will further engineering, environmental work

By Phil Diehl

San Diego County's regional planning agency accepted a \$300 million state grant Friday to advance work needed to move the train tracks off the fragile Del Mar bluffs and to double-track the route between the San Dieguito Lagoon and Sorrento Valley.

"This is a momentous day," said Danny Veeh, a senior planner at the San Diego Association of Governments. "It's larger than any other award that SANDAG has received to work on the LOSSAN corridor."

The LOSSAN corridor is the railroad route from San Diego to Los Angeles and San Luis Obispo. It is San Diego's only rail connection to the outside region and one of the busiest rail corridors in the United States. The entire 351-mile corridor handles 8 million passengers and \$1 billion in goods annually, Veeh said.

The seaside segment on the Del Mar Bluffs has been a problem since the railroad was built, he said. Erosion eats away the bluffs at the average rate of 4 to 6 inches a year and presents "a viable threat to public safety."

SANDAG identified five potential new inland routes in 2017, all with tunnels, and in 2021 narrowed those to two options — the Del Mar Heights and the Camino Del Mar alternatives. The southern end of both routes is in the city of San Diego.

While most people agree the tracks must be moved off the bluffs, not everyone is happy about the suggested routes. Some said they would prefer a route along Interstate 5, which SANDAG did not rate as high among the options because it would be longer, deeper and more expensive.

"There's also a sense of hesitancy, concern and worry about trains going under houses," said Terry Gaasterland, a Del Mar City Council member serving on the SANDAG board.

Homeowners are concerned about whether they might be near one of the tunnel's ventilation shafts, whether they will be able to feel vibrations from trains traveling beneath their homes, and how close they might be to one of the tunnel's portals, Gaasterland said.

Those types of concerns will be examined as part of the upcoming studies, Veeh said. All studies so far show that a tunnel beneath the city of Del Mar is the most viable option.

"We are right now advancing the conceptual tunnel work," he said. "We are kicking off an information campaign to teach the public about tunneling."

Increasing concerns about climate change and sea-level rise have heightened the priority for a Del Mar tunnel.

“We are racing against the clock as we see the climate crisis get worse and worse,” Corinna Contreras, a Vista City Council member and North County Transit District board member, told the SANDAG board.

The proposed tunnel is about half of the project, which also includes double-tracking the railroad across the San Dieguito Lagoon, Veeh said.

Double-tracking, or adding a second set of rails, improves service and makes it more efficient by allowing trains to pass each other. About three-quarters of the San Diego County segment of the railroad has been double-tracked so far, but safety concerns and a narrow right-of-way prohibits a second set in Del Mar.

Rerouting will allow the entire Del Mar segment, including the tunnel, to be double-tracked and will eliminate one of the corridor’s last bottlenecks.

Work on a final design for the segment should begin in 2026, Veeh said. Construction could begin in 2028 and be completed in 2035.

Gaasterland and other speakers encouraged SANDAG to push for completion by 2030, but staffers have said that is not a realistic goal for such a complicated project.

Funding has always been a high hurdle for moving the tracks off the bluffs. Construction estimates range from \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion.

The \$300 million grant from the state’s Transit and Intercity Rail Capital Program was announced July 1 as part of Gov. Gavin Newsom’s \$308 billion state budget. The money will allow SANDAG to complete the preliminary engineering and environmental documents for the project and to start the partially funded final design phase, Veeh said.

Money from the grant also will be used to form an executive task force to help find funds for construction, he said.

Since 2003, SANDAG and NCTD have completed four phases of stabilization projects including seawalls, retaining walls, concrete-and-steel pile, and drainage systems to safeguard the tracks on the Del Mar bluffs.

Despite that work, periodic bluff failures occur, such as one Feb. 28, 2021, that briefly halted all rail traffic and periodically delayed trains for months while repairs costing more than \$10 million were made.

“A prolonged interruption of rail service could mean cumulative GDP losses in the billions of dollars and lost jobs for the region,” states a SANDAG staff report.