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Refurbished railway opens eyes of politicians, port

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SAN DIEGO — Officials from San Diego's port took a look at work being completed on the east-west San Diego-Arizona railway Monday, and came back very happy with what they saw.

Jim Hutzelman, spokesman of the San Diego Unified Port District, said the newly reinvigorated line, which should be carrying regular revenue freight by the end of the year, has great potential to bring more business to the port. "We're pleased with the progress," Hutzelman said.

Although freight has run for many years on the western section of the historic railway, the eastern section — the "desert line" from Campo to Plaster City, where it can connect to **Union Pacific** tracks — hasn't been operational for decades. Now, though, an ambitious venture to revitalize the line organized by **Carrizo Gorge Railway Inc.** has attracted the enthusiasm of not only the port, but the San Diego Metropolitan Transit Development Board and Rep. Bob Filner, who calls it the "jobs train."

"I have been following these guys' work and they have really made amazing progress for a lot less money than people warned for years it would take," Filner said. "This could help us create a working commercial port. I mean, now, if you want to ship something out of San Diego, we only have a train going up to Los Angeles. Why wouldn't a shipper just send their goods to L.A. first?"

Hutzelman said port officials envision being able to tie in shipments of breakbulk cargo, things like steel, newsprint and lumber, soon after the track begins supporting the initial shipments of freight that will begin as soon as November. One

problem remains: Although the north-south line of **Burlington Northern Santa Fe** can pull right up to the port, the east-west San Diego-Arizona railway does not provide that kind of access. For now, freight from the port hoping to make the trip on the newly refurbished track will have to get on a truck first.

That's why Filner says the "decision-makers" need to get together soon and decide how to spend more than \$10 million he helped secure from federal funds that must be spent on some kind of "inter-modal center," a place where easy transitions can be made from ship to truck to train and vice versa.

"We have to spend it before they take it away," Filner said.

Geoff Scheuerman, the general manager of Carrizo Gorge, told *The Daily Transcript* earlier, that critical work on a major tunnel along the desert route had already been completed. As work trains prepare to make their way over the line, he's looking forward to booking shipments.

Jack Limber, the deputy general manager of the Metropolitan Transit Development Board, said his organization normally doesn't concern itself with freight. But it purchased the line 24 years ago to secure it as a trolley passage from San Diego to the Mexican border. With that, he said, the board assumed the responsibility of turning the rest of the track, including the desert section, into a working freight line. Freight moves north and south on the western section of the track during the late-night hours when trolley service ceases.

Not only would a new line help the port and local shippers of commodities, but it might also someday assuage truck and traffic congestion on Highway 94, Limber said.

Rep. Duncan Hunter has long

opposed the recovery efforts for the historic desert railway. After the line leaves San Diego to the south, it crosses the border into Mexico for nearly 45 miles before crossing again for good in Division, Calif. It was Hunter's concern that security could not be guaranteed for a train that crossed the border like that. Illegal immigrants, drugs, weapons or worse could find their way on board. Hunter's press secretary, Michael Harrison told *The Daily Transcript* recently that federal agencies had not alleviated those concerns.

Both Filner and Limber called those concerns a non-issue. Limber said trains already frequently cross the border at San Ysidro and there was no reason to assume the same precautions that take place there would be less effective farther west.

Filner wasn't quite so diplomatic. "(Hunter) thinks there are going to be bandits jumping on the train and that Mexicans are just bandits anyway. Trains are the easiest of vehicles to inspect. You can keep them stopped for as long as you think is necessary — there aren't any worries about blocking traffic. The locks they use on the containers are more advanced and secure than they used to be. Customs officials have given us a report of how many agents they would need to protect it and that's easy to do," he said.

Filner said that a more active port and shipping industry in San Diego would give working people the chance to earn the same kind of money defense contractors used to pay before moving so much of that industry away. "We have high-tech and service industry jobs but nothing in between. A major maritime center could provide that," he said.

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