

Plans for high-speed rail in region get a boost

Calif.-to-Las Vegas route has received federal designation

By Kathleen Hennessey
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LAS VEGAS — The clogged tourist travel route between Southern California and Las Vegas has been designated a federal high-speed rail corridor, in a move that officials hope will signal increased cooperation between the regions on building speedier train travel.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood announced Thursday that the route is now considered part of the federally designated California high-speed-rail corridor.

LaHood called the congestion on Interstate 15 linking Southern California and the Las Vegas area “very bad for business, very bad for safety and certainly very bad for the environment.”

He made the announcement at a news conference in Las Vegas, accompanied by Sen. Harry Reid and California Department of Transportation Director Will Kempton.

The immediate effect of designation appears to be minimal. Nine other rail routes in the United States share the distinction, considered a boost for applying for a portion of the \$8 billion in stimulus funding set aside by the Obama administra-

tion for high-speed-rail projects.

But Kempton said California will not include the Las Vegas leg in its application for federal money. That state’s initial priority — a route connecting several cities along the coast — is considered a front-runner to receive a significant chunk of the federal dollars.

Reid spokesman Jon Summers said the designation could help a Las Vegas route secure federal loans, but transportation officials minimized the distinction’s effect on federal loan programs.

“If they’re going to apply for a loan, they can apply for a loan whether or not they’re a designated corridor,” said Federal Rail Administration spokesman Rob Kulat. “It doesn’t matter; it depends on the quality of the application.”

Still, Reid and Kempton used the announcement to promise that high-speed rail between Southern California and Nevada was on a fast track.

The men also touted their support for one of two competing train proposals vying to be the first to shuttle people across the desert to the casinos of the Las Vegas Strip.

Reid recently abandoned his backing for a futuristic levitating train connecting Anaheim

and Las Vegas. The train, which would be the first in the U.S. to use magnetic levitation technology, was derided as the “Sin City Express” by the Democrat’s political opponents.

On Thursday, the Senate majority leader said the maglev train, which carries an estimated a \$12 billion price tag and would rely on federal money, wasn’t realistic.

Reid’s preferred project is now one advocated by powerful Republican lobbyist and political ally Sig Rogich. The electric DesertXpress train would travel at speeds of up to 150 mph and would stop 85 miles short of Los Angeles in Victorville.

DesertXpress backers say the project’s estimated cost of up to \$4 billion will be privately funded with the help of federal loans.

The president of the group backing the maglev project said he was surprised by the officials’ public endorsement for DesertXpress. When the Obama administration announced its plan to fund high-speed rail earlier this year, Neil Cummings said he thought maglev was poised to get some stimulus money. Even without Reid’s support, Cummings said, the project will move forward.