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California High Speed Rail Authority opts to ignore ridership problems

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Nathanael Johnson, KALW News

The California High Speed Rail Authority met Thursday to review the findings of an analysis on ridership projections for the \$40 billion Los Angeles-San Francisco high speed rail. But despite serious questions about whether ridership and revenues will meet goals, the members of the authority essentially dismissed these findings as academic quibbling.

These academic quibbles, however, could have big consequences. The consultants who performed the ridership analysis have defended themselves by pointing out that they conformed to industry standards. On this point, the peer reviewers agreed. The problem is that the industry standard is fairly terrible - a leading scholar in this field, Bent Flyvbjerg, has shown that 90 percent of the time planners cost estimates are too low. At the most basic level, said David Brownstone a member of the peer review team, planners should tell their clients how confident they are in their results by including a margin of error. But he said, planners generally don't do this.

The problem is that politicians (not to mention readers) start to lapse into catatonia when there is talk of confidence intervals and Chi tests. Nobody has the time to really slow down and grapple with uncertainty - instead people generally want someone to tell them the bottom line, to have an expert say, "this is going to work." Or, "this project is doomed." But ultimately, a willingness to understand and deal with margins of error make a huge difference, said Samer Mandanat, who also worked on the review:

"The best developed models very often have prediction errors of plus or minus 50 percent, and very bad models can be wrong by an order of magnitude," he said. "So these are large right? These are large. Which is why I always emphasize that travel demand models are useful but always have to be taken with a grain of salt."

Knowing the margin of error will tell you exactly how much salt you should take.

Incidentally there's a great article by David Grann in the New Yorker this week that serves as a cautionary parable illustrating the attraction and power a person attains when they make claims of scientific certainty. Subjective matters like planning and art are maddeningly imprecise, but logging through that imprecision is ultimately more profitable than signing on with a charlatan selling certainty.

Posted By: Nathanael Johnson (Email) | July 09 2010 at 02:00 PM

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CHSRA_Media 4:34 PM on July 9, 2010

Mr. Johnson,

Ignoring ridership problems? Nothing could be further from the truth.

The ridership model review - paid for by the California High-Speed Rail Authority - was discussed at length Thursday by the Board of Directors. Both the Berkeley researchers and representatives for Cambridge Systematics, which developed the model, presented their views.

There's no doubt there is an academic component to this debate. The major issue raised in the Berkeley review - whether or not to include a statistical confidence interval for each forecast - is not standard practice in the modeling industry. The Berkeley reviewers acknowledged that themselves at Thursday's meeting.

Rachel Wall
Press Secretary
CA High-Speed Rail Authority

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