

Op-Ed/News

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Funding agreement approved for historic Colton Crossing



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COLTON, CA – After 128 years of railroad trains stopping at the Colton Crossing railroad-to-railroad intersection to allow one another to pass through, a historic agreement was reached on May 19, 2010, when the California Transportation Commission approved the final funding needed to construct a \$202 million railroad overpass bridge. The crossing is located in the City of Colton, just south of Interstate 10. The agreement will fund construction of a grade separation that allows the east-west Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) lines to pass over the north-south Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) railroad tracks.

This junction dates back to 1882, at a time when Colton's first Marshal, Virgil Earp, and his brother Wyatt Earp patrolled the crossing. The Earp brothers guarded the crossing to prevent fighting between the two rail companies while the railroad intersection was under construction. The Earp brothers also patrolled the crossing to keep robbers from approaching the trains while they sat idling, waiting for the other trains to pass through the rail intersection. The Earp brothers probably never dreamed the day would come when both railroads could travel through the crossing without having to stop.

By 2008, more than 110 trains per day passed through Colton Crossing, causing each train to stop or slow down. This junction had become a major chokepoint for moving goods out of and into Southern California.

Constructing the grade separation (either underpass or overpass) has been a heated topic of discussion for several decades, but intensified during the past two years. In 2008, more than \$91 million in funding from the voter-approved California Prop 1B Trade Corridor Improvement Fund (TCIF) was programmed on the Colton Crossing with the



Double sets of railroad tracks intersect at Colton Crossing, located south of the I-10 Freeway in Colton.

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stipulation that an agreement between the railroads and the State could be reached. The TCIF funds are designated for projects that improve the movement of goods, transported either by rail or trucks.

In February 2010, it was announced that Colton Crossing would also receive \$33.8 million in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) stimulus funds through a TIGER grant (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery program). With this ARRA allocation, all the funds needed for the project were identified, with the outstanding issue being the agreement between the parties. The public agencies of the region, including SANBAG and the City of Colton, wanted to ensure that public benefits were commensurate with the public investment. After weeks of intensive negotiations between all the parties involved, including the City of Colton, SANBAG, UPRR, BNSF, Caltrans, and the Southern California Concensus Group (a coalition of transportation-related agencies), an agreement was reached that provides benefits to the region and the City of Colton.

The regional benefits include:

- Improved air quality from the reduction of idling trains waiting to pass through the crossing;
- Time savings for and reduced air pollution from idling cars would be realized due to the reduction of delays at railroad crossings;
- Stimulation of the regional economy by creating an estimated 2,000 jobs;
- The addition of four more Metrolink passenger train slots on the north/south BNSF tracks between Riverside and San Bernardino will take more vehicles off the freeways and subsequently reduce congestion and air pollution;
- Right-of-way concessions from the railroads that will benefit commuter rail;
- Relief of existing Metrolink contractual obligations to fund rail improvements; and
- Consumers across the nation will benefit from efficient transport of goods from the ports to the rest of the country.

Improvements that will be constructed to provide public benefit to the City of Colton include the following:

- Quiet Zones within the City will eliminate the need for trains to sound their horns;
- A railroad grade separation at Laurel Street will reduce the impact rail operations have on vehicle circulation; and
- Realignment of the 9th Street rail line so it is not in the center of a residential street.

The Colton Crossing grade separation will provide significant local, regional and national benefits. Analysis has determined that the value of these public benefits significantly exceeds the nearly \$125 million (\$91 million TCIF, \$33.8 million TIGER) public contribution toward the project. With the railways contributing the remainder of the funding, the project is moving forward. The environmental review is well underway, final design is about to commence, and construction is scheduled to start in the fall of 2011.

We commend the California Transportation Commission for making this landmark decision. Completion of the Colton Crossing project will be a historic event that will provide benefits to our region for generations to come.

For additional information, call 909-884-8276, or visit SANBAG's website: sanbag.ca.gov

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