Why the future of Caltrain is being built in Salt Lake City

Swiss company building new fleet of electric trains

The outside shell of new Caltrain trains at the Salt Lake City production facility of Swiss train company Stadler. The company is replacing 75 percent of Caltrain's diesel train fleet with faster and greener electrified trains. (Courtesy of Caltrain)

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SALT LAKE CITY — The future of Caltrain is taking shape in a gusty sagebrush plain formerly owned by the Mormon Church with a dramatic view of the snow-covered Oquirrh Mountains.
The $2 billion electrification project is replacing most of Caltrain’s trains and putting up electric wires along the 51-mile track from San Francisco to San Jose’s Tamien station. Once it’s complete, proponents say, the difference between the new electric trains and the current diesel ones will be like Teslas versus gas guzzlers: nimbler, smoother and far more energy efficient.

“We want to convince people to leave their cars at home,” said Martin Ritter, the U.S. chief executive of Stadler, the Swiss company that’s building the trains.

The future of rail in California got a jolt last week when newly elected Gov. Gavin Newsom said he was scaling down ambitions for the state’s San Francisco-to-Los Angeles bullet train, focusing on a Merced-to-Bakersfield section for the near future. The Caltrain electrification project would allow the rapid trains to share its tracks up the Peninsula, and the state’s high-speed rail agency committed $741 million to the project, with the rest coming from local and federal funds.
The Salt Lake City production facility of Swiss train company Stadler, which is replacing 75 percent of Caltrain's diesel train fleet with faster and greener electrified trains. (Courtesy of Stadler Rail)

But even now that bullet trains may not reach the Bay Area anytime soon, Caltrain's electrification funding is unaffected — and the project is currently on budget and on schedule, with service planned to start in 2022.

Caltrain is the largest U.S. contract yet for Stadler, which has built trains for railways around the world, including the new biodiesel trains on BART's extension to Antioch (which were made in Switzerland). The company's leaders call their Salt Lake City plant an investment in the prediction that increasingly congested American cities will need to build more of the public transit that's common in European capitals.
RIDE THE ELECTRIC TRAIN

Caltrain’s ambitious $2 billion electrification project is taking shape in Utah. Trains to replace 75 percent of the Caltrain fleet -- one of the biggest upgrades in the railroad’s more than 150-year history -- are being built at a new facility run by a Swiss company.

- Free WiFi
- Reduced engine noise
- Reduced travel time
- Smoother ride, thanks to special air cushioning around wheels
- Faster acceleration and energy savings
- One car with a bathroom per train
- Two bike cars on every train
- Most seats have a power outlet
- New digital destination signage

Source: Caltrain

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The Bay Area is a perfect example. The region’s most important highways are sluggish every rush hour, and the traffic is getting worse — by 2040, an additional 1.2 million people will be living within two miles of Caltrain stations along the San Francisco Peninsula. At the same time, more than half of Caltrain’s passenger cars, as well as two-thirds of its locomotives, are already past their retirement age, requiring costly extra maintenance.

The electrification project is aimed at getting more people to ride the rail. The new trains will still run at 79 mph, the same as the current maximum speed, but they’ll be much faster at stopping and starting. That means they can fit in more stops in less time.

The upgraded trains also will feature free WiFi, an electric outlet at almost every seat, more luggage space and improved digital signage. Each train still will have multiple bike cars, although only one bathroom.
Signs of progress were clear on a recent afternoon at Stadler’s Salt Lake City facility. Six bright and shiny red-and-white train cars stood out on the assembly floor, skeletons waiting to be filled with the guts of the train’s interior. Workers in bright orange vests aimed laser trackers to mark locations for bolts and screws and started to install stairs and other components.

Even as the work progressed, construction continued on the facility itself, which includes a massive warehouse for hundreds of train parts and special rooms to work on different pieces of the new trains. Big Swiss and U.S. flags hung from the walls.

“In March last year, we literally had cows grazing out here,” said Jacob Splan, the energetic construction manager, as he gave a whirlwind tour of the sprawling plant. “It’s a mad dash right now to finish it.”

A view inside the shell of a new Caltrain train at the Salt Lake City production facility of Swiss train company Stadler. (Casey Tolan/Bay Area News Group)

The car shells make an impressive journey from Stadler’s factory in Altenrhein, Switzerland: They’re trucked to Basel, boated down the Rhine River to Antwerp, shipped across the Atlantic to Houston and then delivered via rail to Salt Lake City.
Closer to home, crews already are installing 3,000 new electric poles along the tracks to power the trains. There will be some service changes on weekends and evenings across the route through next year.

Once the project is done, Caltrain will be an exception — electrified trains account for less than 1 percent of railroad tracks in the U.S., compared to roughly a third around the world, according to researchers.

The Utah plant represents a big reason that Caltrain's electrification project is actually going forward. Soon after President Trump took office in 2017, his administration delayed the final sign-off on $647 million in federal funds for the effort, even though it had passed almost the entire approval process under President Obama's Department of Transportation.

Democratic leaders protested the holdup, accusing the president of trying to get back at a state that voted heavily against him. California Republicans argued that the project was a wasteful way of boosting the high-speed rail project.

But some of Caltrain’s biggest champions were Utah’s GOP officials, including then-Senate President Pro Tem Orrin Hatch, who supported the project for its economic impact here. Caltrain is expected to create more than 500 jobs in Utah.
“It wasn’t just blue California but really suppliers across the country” that benefit from the project, said Casey Fromson, Caltrain’s government affairs director. “That was a pretty powerful argument.”

Why Salt Lake City? Utah has a big logistics and transportation industry, and Stadler also is receiving generous tax incentives from the city and the state. Thanks to the Mormon Church’s wide-ranging missionary program, the region also has a lot of bilingual people — German and English can both be heard on the factory floor.

And the folks from Switzerland feel at home among the mountain peaks and snow of the Salt Lake Valley region. “It looks almost the same to me,” said Christoph Brocker, the project manager, who had worked on similar train projects in Austria and Switzerland before coming to the U.S. to build Caltrains.

One difference between working in Switzerland and Utah: “Don’t ask your people to come to work on a Sunday here — they won’t show up,” Brocker said. “But they’ll work twice as hard on a Saturday.”
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Casey Tolan covers national politics and the Trump administration for the Bay Area News Group. Previously, he was a reporter for the news website Fusion, where he covered criminal justice, immigration, and politics. His reporting has also been published in CNN, Slate, the Village Voice, the Texas Observer, the Daily Beast and other news outlets. Casey grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and graduated from Columbia University.

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