



# Harry's Electric Train

*Bugsy would be proud. Words by Tim Findley. Illustrations by John Bardwell.*

Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) always did seem to have a little bit of Bugsy Siegel in him. But the \$6 million or so that Siegel took from the mob to build the Flamingo in Las Vegas in 1946 looks like street change compared to the up to \$8 billion in federal taxes the Senate Majority Leader suggested he might secure for a high-speed train to do the same thing—get the gamblers in Los Angeles to leave their money in Vegas.

Reid wants to pay for a bullet train out of federal economic stimulus funds. Siegel, who couldn't pay back his mob friends, finally took a bullet from them. But that's a poor and tasteless way to compare the two Glitter Gulch promoters who really share no more than mutual friends in their efforts separated by more than 60 years.

Del Webb was the kind of self-made man who bought the New York Yankees in 1945 because he loved baseball. He would build anything, including Army contracts during the war for relocation camps, which some think might help explain how Siegel got all that

black market lumber for the Flamingo. Siegel had been a New York gangster-gunman before he sought out Webb to build the Flamingo. It was Webb, with some mob contacts of his own, who warned Bugsy, as cost overruns continued on the project, that he had seen a lot of heavy-pocketed men in suits hanging around.

"Don't worry, we only shoot each other," Webb said Siegel told him. Despite what happened to Bugsy, in time Del Webb built so many casinos that the company was suspected of trying to establish a gaming monopoly. Without much fuss, the contractor turned his attention to senior citizen housing developments.

As a Las Vegas lawyer and later head of the Nevada Gaming Commission, Reid too came to know Del Webb well. So well that in the 1990s when the reorganized Del Webb Company was looking for available land around Las Vegas, now-Sen. Reid was at their service, providing opportunities for Del Webb to buy northern Nevada farmland denied irrigation supplies by a piece of Reid legislation

supposedly meant to save wetlands. Working with Reid through The Nature Conservancy, Del Webb was able to buy the farmland and then exchange it for federal property around Las Vegas where the developers—and Reid—wanted to take advantage of new housing growth.

By the mid-'90s, Las Vegas had become by far the fastest growing region in the nation. Reid celebrated that by putting through a bill for federal financing of a new bridge between Nevada and Arizona—conveniently just a short distance from property the senator owned.

Vegas is a suburb away from the Colorado River and Hoover Dam, but there are restrictions on what share Glitter Gulch may take of that water. Reid helped that by quietly putting through legislation that would provide federal help to build pipelines to ship water from northern Nevada to Vegas, claiming that would benefit everybody, including the small farm towns in the north.

He also began work to provide a huge new power grid through his state, running from White Pine County, where the farms and the ranches and the water are, south to Las Vegas, where people like Reid live in abundance. He took a firm years-long position against the use of Yucca Mountain (near Vegas) for underground storage of nuclear waste and, more recently, has proclaimed his opposition to new coal plants planned in the southern part of the state. Sen. Reid knows the value of defending the environment. "All that sun and wind in White Pine County needs to be converted to alternative energy and sent on the power grid to Reno and Las Vegas," he told the Senate. They believed him, unaware that it's hotter and windier—and certainly drier—around Vegas.

But the train—his very own electric train all the way to Los Angeles—was a Christmas dream even Bugsy Siegel dared not have. Actually there was already a train being planned by private investors to

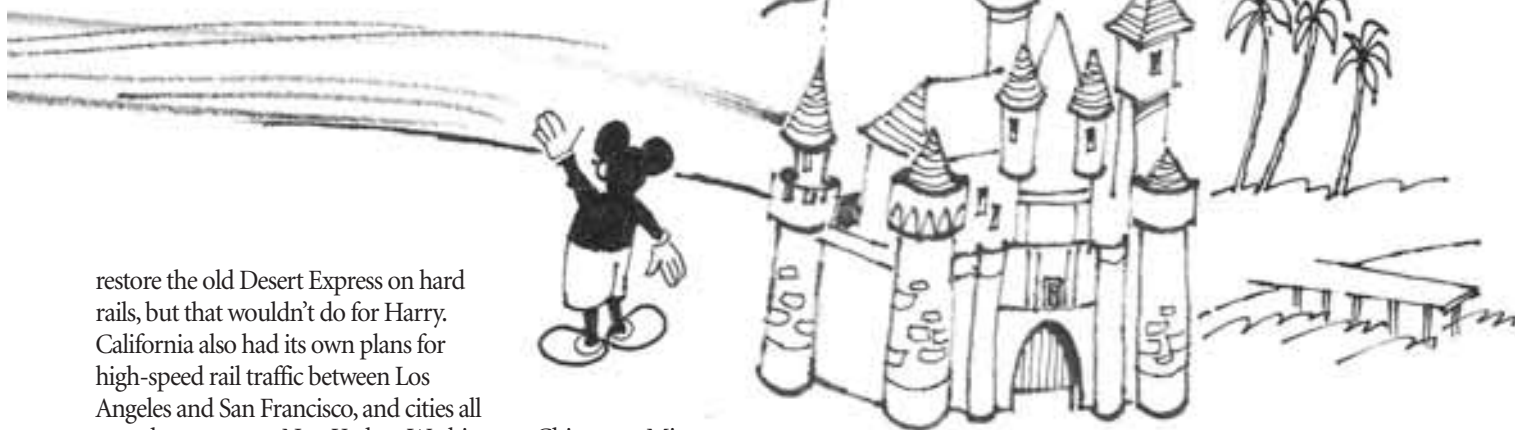
Obama had not included high-speed rail in the stimulus package, but reports persist that it was only at the last minute as the stimulus bill was being finished that Reid, with the help of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), managed to convince the president that the idea was more than just local pork.

The Associated Press reported that Reid's office was delighted with the \$8 billion inclusion, saying "a good chunk of it could go to Los Angeles-Las Vegas." Reid denied he said it, claiming he was just doing good things to get the economy moving again.

That high-speed rail element of the economy can't get moving at all for at least a year or more until plans are clear. Estimates are it will take at least 10 years to build, and meanwhile other projects already working, like Desert Express, won't be hiring either. Disneyland isn't broke yet, although it too has problems in this economy. Las Vegas is never broke, though these days it has the most foreclosed housing of any city in the country for those willing to take the chance.

And if you do, by the way, Vegas is very proud of its new monorail system zipping through the strip around the casinos. There's a stop just a few feet away from the entrance to the Flamingo. Wouldn't Bugsy be proud?

And high-speed Harry? He's up for reelection next year, just in time to remind his big constituency in Las Vegas how valuable he really is. ■



restore the old Desert Express on hard rails, but that wouldn't do for Harry. California also had its own plans for high-speed rail traffic between Los Angeles and San Francisco, and cities all over the country—New York to Washington, Chicago to Minneapolis—all put bullet trains on their wish list after seeing the success of high-speed rail in Europe.

But just another high-speed train like that to Paris couldn't match the exotic speed of the magnetic levitation train Harry envisioned between Disneyland and Las Vegas. Short of that would be like taking an old Lionel diesel or a monorail in place of what he really wanted—a bullet train, capable of 220 miles an hour or more, racing across the desert. Nobody yet has one of them. Even the Chinese tried, but couldn't finance it. But reports are that Reid is already securing the rights-of-way, in much the same manner he had swapped farmland for a deal with Del Webb.

It might still happen, wham bam, except that Reid's own ever-arrogant mouth may have gotten in the way again. Initially, President

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