Record ride sells legislator on rail

Assemblywoman is determined to keep measure on 2008 ballot after riding French train that reached 357 mph

By Steve Lawrence
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SACRAMENTO - A California lawmaker got a firsthand look Tuesday at the potential of high-speed rail as a double-decker train raced through the French countryside at a record 357 mph.

Assemblywoman Fiona Ma, D-San Francisco, said she was the only American on board when a train operated by the French high-speed rail system surpassed the previous mark for conventional rail of 320.2 mph, which was set in 1990 by another French train.

A magnetically levitated Japanese train holds the ultimate speed record of 361 mph.

Ma said the approximately 15 minute ride was "pretty amazing."

"It felt like we were ready to take off on the runway in a plane," she said. "That steady acceleration ... feeling and force."

Ma is part of a delegation of a half-dozen lawmakers who are in France this week, in part to examine the French high-speed rail system as California considers building a 700-mile system of its own to carry passengers at speeds of more than 200 mph.

Ma said she ended up on the record-setting run after the legislators met Monday with representatives of Alstom, a company that makes trains for the French high-speed rail system, TGV.

She said company officials were "all excited about setting the world speed record" and offered to take a member of the California delegation on the ride. "I kind of chimed up and said it would be great to be on there. ... I jumped at the chance."

While she was on the record-setting ride, the other lawmakers -- Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez, D-Los Angeles, and Assemblymen John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, Joe Coto, D-San Jose, Michael Duvall, R-Yorba Linda, and Bob Huff, R-Diamond Bar -- had a meeting with the French transportation minister, Ma said.

Her experience was probably more memorable.

"It's something that is going to go down in my history book," she said. "How many times does one have an opportunity to do that, to be part of history?"

She said the ride made her even more convinced that California needs to develop high-speed rail, which has been in the planning stages for more than 10 years.

A nearly $10 billion bond measure that would help pay for a high-speed rail line between Los Angeles and the Bay Area will be on the state's November 2008 ballot. Plans also call for links to Sacramento and San Diego.

But a vote on the bond measure has been delayed twice already, and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger wants lawmakers to bump it from the 2008 ballot.

Ma said she and other high-speed rail supporters hope to persuade Schwarzenegger to support the 2008 vote and to increase funding in his proposed budget to allow the state's high-speed rail board to do engineering work and begin buying right of way for the bullet trains in the next fiscal year.

"Our highways are congested," she said. "We're not going to be able to put more runways at our airports. The only way to move people around efficiently and effectively is a high-speed rail system like we have in Europe."

Sabrina Lockhart, a spokeswoman for Schwarzenegger, said the Republican governor has other priorities for state bonds, including prisons and flood control, but is willing to consider other ways to pay for high-speed rail, such as private financing.

"The governor understands the state has limited ability to borrow money at this time," she said.

As far as boosting his budget proposals for the 2007-08 fiscal year for high-speed rail, Lockhart said the governor was "always willing to work with the Legislature to achieve budget solutions."