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Branson taking train to AV

Mogul set to team up on rail to Las Vegas

By ALLISON GATLIN Valley Press Staff Writer Nov 20, 2018



BOUND FOR THE VALLEY? — Florida private passenger rail company Brightline, which has plans to build and operate a high-speed train between Las Vegas and Southern California, will take on the Virgin brand with a minority investment by the international company and a new name: Virgin Trains USA.

Contributed photo

Already entrenched in Mojave and Long Beach with Virgin Galactic and Virgin Orbit, Sir Richard Branson's empire has found another Southern California connection, as the British mogul announced last week a strategic partnership with Brightline, the Florida private passenger rail company that has plans to provide high-speed rail service between Las Vegas and Victorville, and eventually to Palmdale.

The minority investment by the Virgin Group includes new branding, as Brightline

becomes Virgin Trains USA.

The firm operates passenger rail service between Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach and plans to expand into Orlando and Tampa, according to a company statement.

In September, Brightline announced it has acquired XpressWest, the high-speed rail project that has a federally approved corridor between Las Vegas and Victorville, with plans to continue the line to Palmdale where it will connect with other transportation services.

It will take over development, construction and operation of the proposed high-speed line, which would travel on a 185-mile right-of-way along Interstate 15 in its first phase, with no at-grade or pedestrian crossings.

Construction is expected to begin next year and the company plans to begin initial service in 2022, according to a company statement.

Company officials said teaming with Virgin will bring that firm's expertise and brand name, as well as access to potential customers through other Virgin travel and leisure companies, officials said.

"Our private sector-led effort to reinvent passenger rail service in America is taking another leap forward with the addition of the Virgin team," said Wes Edens, chairman of Brightline and co-founder of Fortress Investment Group. "Virgin has built a respected and trusted brand in travel and hospitality. With our shared focus on customer experience, powered by a culture of innovation and disruption, we are well positioned to build on our success."

Virgin Trains has operated high-speed intercity service through the United Kingdom for 21 years, officials said.

“We have had a lot of fun and success creating innovative transport businesses that shake up markets and establish loyal followings,” said Branson, founder of Virgin. “We transformed domestic air travel with Virgin America. Tens of millions of Americans travel on the railways every day, and we have tried for over a decade to find an opportunity to provide them with that same excellent service experience. Brightline is at the forefront of innovation in this market, and the ideal partner for Virgin to work with to alter perceptions and traveling habits across the United States.”

Palmdale officials have long supported the Las Vegas high-speed rail project as part of the High Desert Corridor, intended to eventually include rail and highway development running east and west across the Antelope and Victor valleys.

While the acquisition by Brightline earlier this year was viewed by city officials as a positive step toward making that goal a reality, showing private-sector confidence in the project, the latest news of the Virgin brand’s involvement takes the project a step further.

“I think that it takes a concepts that we thought had merit and makes it an internationally known product,” Palmdale City Manager James Purtee said Monday. “Now, with Virgin, Richard Branson, signing in on this thing, that really gives it the investor quality we’re looking for.”

As announced by Brightline, the initial service will be between Las Vegas and Victorville, the segment of the corridor for which a Federal Railroad Administration permit and the appropriate right-of-way have been secured. The company said future plans are to expand into the Los Angeles area, but no specific destination is cited, only that planning for additional stations and connectivity to Metrolink and the California High-Speed Rail is underway.

Purtee and a delegation from the Antelope Valley plan to visit Florida next month to speak with Brightline/Virgin Trains USA officials and tour their rail stations, Purtee said.

Branson brought the Virgin name to Mojave in 2004 with Virgin Galactic, a space travel

company building on the design of the Ansari X Prize-winning SpaceShipOne.

Since that time, the presence has grown at the Mojave Air and Space Port to include The Spaceship Company, responsible for the development and manufacturing of SpaceShipTwo and other vehicles, and the rocket testing activity for Virgin Orbit, a satellite launch firm headquartered in Long Beach.

Virgin Galactic and The Spaceship Company combine to be the largest employer at the Mojave Air and Space Port, with about 500 employees at The Spaceship Company and another 180 at Virgin Galactic, said Enrico Palermo, president of The Spaceship Company.

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