

Fresno firm wins \$1 million consulting contract for high-speed rail

BY TIM SHEEHAN

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A Fresno firm won a two-year, \$1 million contract to take over consulting chores for the Merced-Bakersfield section of the state's proposed high-speed rail project.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority, meeting Monday in Los Angeles, awarded the consulting contract to Precision Civil Engineering, which is based in Fresno with offices in Sacramento, Paso Robles, Bakersfield and Arizona. The company, headed by Ed Dunkel Jr., was deemed the best qualified from among six companies that responded to the authority's advertisements in August.

"It's huge for us," Dunkel said Monday. "We're excited that the authority has shown this kind of trust in a small business. ... I think we can do a great job for them."

A much larger company, AECOM, had served as the regional consultant for the Sacramento-Merced section for several years before the rail agency opted to re-advertise the contract. AECOM's contract expired at the end of September.

Dunkel said the bulk of the company's work will be outreach and public relations to people and communities within the 110-mile section. The rail authority's scope of work also calls for analyzing route alternatives, station area planning, and developing private investment opportunities. Precision's project team will be based in Sacramento.

Precision Civil Engineering has been involved with different aspects of high-speed rail planning for several years in the Fresno area. The company provided design and environmental analysis work for Fresno County's proposed site for a high-speed rail heavy-maintenance facility, coordinated the rail authority's presentation of its April 2012 business plan in the region, and developed a database of high-speed rail stakeholders in the San Joaquin Valley.

"We were one of the first local engineering firms to work with high-speed rail," Dunkel said. "We stuck our neck out there early on, and fortunately, doing that has come to fruition."

Federal funds first

Monday's meeting came on the heels of [court filings](#) Friday by the rail agency arguing that it can first use federal stimulus and transportation money before having to commit any state bond funds for its controversial bullet-train plans. It's one piece of a two-pronged legal argument the

agency set forth in its court battle against opponents in Kings County who say the high-speed rail project violates Proposition 1A, a \$9.9 billion bond measure approved by California voters in 2008.

A Sacramento County Superior Court judge agreed with Kings County farmer John Tos, Hanford homeowner Aaron Fukuda and the Kings County Board of Supervisors that the authority's 2011 business and financing plans did not meet Prop. 1A requirements because they failed to:

- Specifically identify where the rail authority anticipated receiving the \$30 million needed to fully build its initial operating segment between Merced and the Los Angeles basin.
- Certify that the agency had completed its environment analysis and approval for the entire Merced-Los Angeles operating section before beginning any construction. To date, the only portion of the route with completed environmental certifications is the Merced-Fresno section, excluding an area around Chowchilla.

The rail authority awarded a \$985 million contract for the design and construction of the state's first 29-mile section in the Fresno-Madera area. But Judge Michael Kenny did not order work halted on the project. Instead, Kenny set a Nov. 8 hearing at which attorneys for Kings County and the rail agency will argue what penalties, if any, should be enforced for the violations. Kenny's ruling stated that the authority could still use Prop. 1A money for non-construction work, including engineering and design and to buy property it needs for right of way in Fresno and Madera counties.

The federal government has provided about \$3.2 billion to California for high-speed rail construction in the San Joaquin Valley, and the state is obligated to put up about \$2.6 billion in matching funds from Prop. 1A. The federal funds must be spent by Sept. 30, 2017. Under the original grant agreement, the federal and state money were to be spent simultaneously. But in December, according to court records, the deal was changed to allow the state to use federal money first, "essentially advancing federal grant payments until the Authority is allowed to commit Prop. 1A bond funds" to construction.

"The agreement allows the use of federal funds to cover up to 100% of the project costs at the outset of project development," the state's attorneys said, with the state's contributions coming later in the process to meet its obligations by the time the work is completed in the fall of 2017.

Because no state money has been spent yet on construction, the rail authority argues, the judge should deny a request by Tos, Fukuda and Kings County to invalidate the agency's contracts for the Madera-Fresno construction section.

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