

Calif. High-Speed Rail seeks east route through Kings County -- again

BY LEWIS GRISWOLD

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The California High-Speed Rail Authority staff has come full circle and is again advising that the controversial rail alignment through Kings County be routed east of Hanford instead of west.

After recommending in April to go west of Hanford because the eastern alignment raised the hackles of property owners, the rail staff was directed by the authority board to seek further public input. The staff now plans to present a revised recommendation to the board next week in Sacramento.

The eastern route is preferred because it would cause less harm to wetlands and natural upland habitat, and be compatible with Hanford's long-term growth plans, a staff report released Thursday said.

Additionally, if a train station is ever built for residents in Kings and Tulare counties, the eastern alignment would be closer to Highway 99 and the cities of Hanford and Visalia, the report said.

Regardless of the route, Kings County still opposes high-speed rail through the county, citing irreparable harm to farms and other issues.

"It doesn't matter what they want, we don't want this in Kings County," Board of Supervisors Chairman Dough Verboon said. "Agriculture is the No. 1 source of income in Kings County. We can't lose one acre."

Kings County officials learned of the revised eastern alignment from an HSR Authority representative, who told county supervisors in a voice message that convenience to travelers was a factor in the new alignment recommendation, Kings County Counsel Colleen Carlson said.

But convenience for travelers "is not an environmental reason for choosing a route," she said. Carlson's comments came before the report was made public.

HSR spokeswoman Lisa Alley said the authority board will be asked to accept the eastern alignment, which includes bypasses around Corcoran and Allensworth, so staff can submit the documents to the Army Corps of Engineers and the federal Environmental Protection Agency for approval.

Aaron Fukuda, who lives on a 2-acre rural parcel east of Hanford that might be in the path of an eastern alignment, said the staff's recommendation is sure to be accepted.

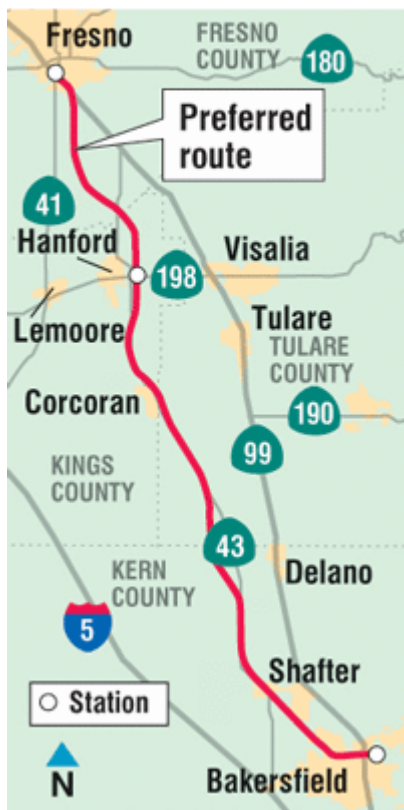
"It doesn't change our attitude, whether it's east or west," Fukuda said. "The alignment is flawed."

Meanwhile, Verboon said, Kings County officials are focused on the county's lawsuit against the High-Speed Rail Authority, which alleges that it is ignoring the language of Proposition 1A regarding financing for the project and other issues. Prop. 1A was approved by voters to build high speed rail in California.

A court hearing in Sacramento Superior Court is scheduled for Nov. 8, the day after the High-Speed Rail Authority Board meets to discuss the Fresno-to-Bakersfield alignment.

HSR route shifts

Staffers are recommending a route east of Hanford in Kings County.



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