

High-speed rail route in Valley comes under scrutiny

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The Fresno Bee November 7, 2013

<http://www.fresnobee.com/2013/11/07/3595332/high-speed-rail-route-in-valley.html?sp=/99/406/263/1256/>

SACRAMENTO — A controversial route for high-speed trains east of Hanford through Kings County is one step closer to reality following a vote Thursday by the California High-Speed Rail Authority board.

The rail board voted 8-0 to identify the Hanford East bypass as part of a preferred route for its 114-mile Fresno-Bakersfield section. The route, which swings across farmland east of the city, is one of two bypass options considered in the area. Now the rail authority will submit the route to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for their evaluation.

In addition to the Hanford East bypass, the route also includes bypasses around Corcoran in Kings County and the town of Allensworth in Tulare County, and follows the Burlington Northern Santa Fe freight railroad line through the Kern County communities of Wasco and Shafter before swinging into a station site in downtown Bakersfield.

The authority board concurred with its staff that the overall route represented the "least environmentally damaging practicable alternative" for the Fresno-Bakersfield section -- one portion of the San Joaquin Valley "backbone" of the proposed 520-mile statewide high-speed train system.

Elected officials and residents of Kings County, where opposition runs high to any route through the county, were unhappy with the vote and what they called a continued lack of cooperation between the rail agency and county officials.

Doug Verboon, chairman of the Kings County Board of Supervisors, had asked the rail agency "not to make a mistake creating more momentum for an alignment through Kings County until you coordinate with the county."

"Real people are facing real impacts ... to their lives and livelihoods," he added.

Dan Richard, the rail board's chairman, explained that Thursday's vote does not represent a final decision on the Fresno-Bakersfield route. But he said "it certainly does indicate that the weight of the analysis will be looking at that alternative" as the agency moves toward developing a final version of its environmental-impact report for the section.

"Nothing precludes us from taking a different direction when we adopt the final EIR," Richard said. He added that if the EPA and Corps of Engineers disagree with the authority's findings, those two federal agencies "could direct us to do something else."

The board is expected next spring to certify a final EIR and formally select a Fresno-Bakersfield route.

In April, the rail authority's staff recommended a route that would bypass Hanford to the west, between Hanford and Armona -- itself a reversal of an earlier proposal for a Hanford East bypass.

Diana Gomez, the rail authority's regional director in the Central Valley, said the Hanford East bypass would affect the smallest acreage of wetlands and wildlife habitat, "and it is more compatible with Hanford's future growth than the Hanford West bypass."

Additionally, Gomez said, running the route and building a passenger station east of Hanford would put the station a few miles closer to Visalia, where city leaders have actively lobbied for a station nearer their community.

"We don't want to miss the train. We don't want to wave at it as it goes by," Visalia Mayor Amy Shuklian told the rail board.

Shuklian said her city backs the Hanford East option. "For more than 10 years, Visalia has supported a high-speed rail station in our region," even offering free land if the route came close to Visalia, Shuklian said.

Barring that, she added, a potential station site near two state highways, Highways 43 and 198 on the east side of Hanford, "are suitably located to serve both Tulare and Kings counties."

The rail board's lone representative from the San Joaquin Valley, Fresno developer Tom Richards, said he was disappointed that talks between the rail agency and Kings County representatives had not yielded a route "that would be more acceptable in the Hanford area" than the Hanford East bypass.

Richards said that in April, "I thought hopefully that Hanford west might be less impactful on a lot of assets in the area." But the information presented to the board Thursday made it "hard not to accept that east is the proper choice to select as the preferred alternative."

The eastern bypass around Hanford, first proposed more than two years ago, was one of the factors that fanned the flames of opposition to high-speed rail in Kings County. Aaron Fukuda, whose home in the rural Ponderosa neighborhood east of Hanford would be among those displaced by the East route, was one of the founders of Citizens for California High-Speed Rail Accountability, a local grass-roots opposition group. Fukuda is also one of the plaintiffs in a

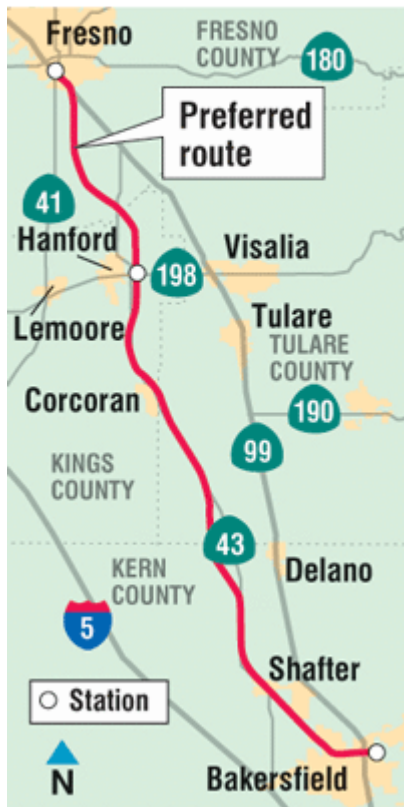
lawsuit alleging that the rail authority's plans violate Proposition 1A, the \$9.9 billion high-speed rail bond measure approved by California voters in 2008.

"I can only imagine how devastated Aaron Fukuda would be with this," Richards said. "I'm sorry we cannot find an alternative that's acceptable to everyone, but I agree that this is the appropriate choice."

Gomez said the estimated construction cost for the entire Fresno-Bakersfield section using the preferred route would be about \$7.2 billion.

HSR route shifts

Rail board backs a route east of Hanford in Kings County.



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This story will be updated.