

# Fresno County supervisors vote to oppose high-speed rail

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By Tim Sheehan



An artist's rendition of California's high-speed rail.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY SW PARRA — The Fresno Bee

The Fresno County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday switched tracks in its position on California's proposed high-speed rail project, voting 3-2 to oppose it.

Supervisors Andreas Borgeas, Debbie Poochigian and Phil Larson supported Poochigian's resolution to oppose California's bullet-train plans. Supervisors Judy Case McNairy and Henry R. Perea voted against the motion.

The action rescinds earlier county votes dating to at least 2009 to support high-speed rail, and asks that the state Legislature place the issue back on the ballot. California voters originally approved Proposition 1A, a \$9.9 billion high-speed rail bond measure, in 2008.

The vote aligns Fresno County with other San Joaquin Valley counties that have taken formal positions opposing the California High-Speed Rail Authority's plans. Madera, Merced, Kings, Tulare and Kern counties are on record with opposition resolutions, and Kings and Kern are going to court with the rail

authority.

Fresno County's board members also voted along the same 3-2 lines to support a proposal by Borgeas to weigh in with a legal brief in support of Kings County's lawsuit.

Borgeas said his resolution is the only real avenue left for Fresno County: "They're taking buildings away, they're preparing for the rail system. ... The only place I believe it matters right now is the courts."

The votes revealed sharp differences in how board members view high-speed rail. The contentiousness of the issue was illustrated when Perea, an ardent supporter of the train project, questioned whether Borgeas and Poochigian had bartered for support of each other's resolutions during a short break in the meeting.

"Unbelievable," Borgeas said, shaking his head. "The answer to your question is not only no, it's hell no.

"That's a low blow," Poochigian added.

Poochigian noted that county supervisors voted in 2007, before she was on the board, and in 2009 to support the concept of high-speed rail. But, "We have an entire list of promises that have not been kept. ... The current project doesn't resemble Prop. 1A."

Poochigian first raised her resolution two weeks ago, but the board voted then to wait until Tuesday's meeting. At the time, it appeared that only Perea was resolute in his support of high-speed rail.

Larson said he originally supported high-speed rail, "and I still think high-speed rail has a place. But I think at this time we need to take a breath and say, 'What can we do to make it better?' "

Borgeas said he backed Poochigian's resolution to oppose high-speed rail, "but not without great reservation and even some heartburn."

"I look at this as a ballot integrity issue," he added. "Have we honored the wishes of the Prop. 1A vote? I don't know how anybody could agree that those representations have been adhered to."

Prop. 1A called for the eventual development of a bullet-train system linking San Francisco and Los Angeles, by way of the San Joaquin Valley, with lines ultimately extending to Sacramento and San Diego. The cost at that time was estimated at \$33 billion for a system that would carry passengers on electric-powered trains capable of traveling at up to 220 mph and making a nonstop trip between San Francisco and Los Angeles in 2 hours 40 minutes. The law also requires that there be no subsidy of public money for operating the system.

The latest cost estimate by the state rail authority is \$68 billion for the San Francisco-Los Angeles route, with no forecast of the added cost to extend the tracks to Sacramento or San Diego.

Case McNairy had pitched an alternative resolution "to express this board's concern with the financing ... and bond indebtedness" but stopping short of opposing the project.

"I think there are a good share of us on this board who believe the state is borrowing too much money and getting us in trouble," Case McNairy said. She added that she believed "a flat statement of non-support ... with regard to rail would be a huge mistake."

Perea said opposing high-speed rail would repeat earlier political missteps from the 1990s that saw Fresno County lose out to Merced for the location of the newest University of California campus and Children's Hospital move across the San Joaquin River to Madera County.

"Fresno County did what we did so well -- snatch defeat from the jaws of victory," Perea said after the

votes Tuesday.

Poochigian's symbolic resolution has no formal bearing on Fresno County's efforts to be chosen as the site for a heavy maintenance station for the statewide high-speed rail system. But Perea said he's heard from officials in neighboring counties hinting that they might reconsider their opposition if it gives them a better chance at landing the maintenance facility and the 1,500 to 2,000 permanent jobs it is expected to create.

"A lot of those counties are re-evaluating their position," Perea said. "I think we'll soon see different actions coming from those other counties.

Michael Brady, a Redwood City attorney representing Kings County farmer John Tos, Hanford resident Aaron Fukuda and the Kings County Board of Supervisors in their Prop. 1A lawsuit against the rail authority, said the county's application for an amicus brief is timely because Sacramento County Superior Court Judge Michael Kenny is expected to hear the case sometime this fall.

"Most trial courts look with favor upon amicus briefs submitted by public agencies such as a county or a city because you're reflecting the will of your people," Brady added.

Demolition of buildings to make way for the rail line began earlier this month in central Fresno, and construction is expected to commence later this summer.

"I think it's unfortunate that at the time we are creating jobs and investing in Central California that the board has taken this non-binding action in opposition to high-speed rail," said Tom Richards, a Fresno developer who serves as vice chairman of the California High-Speed Rail Authority's board. "As the only Valley representative on the (authority's) board of directors, I'm disappointed."

But, he added, "the authority will continue to work with both the city and the county to build a high-speed rail system ... according to the conditions of Prop. 1A."

### **How they voted**

Fresno County Supervisor Debbie Poochigian on Tuesday introduced a resolution to oppose California's bullet-train plans. It rescinds earlier county votes to support high-speed rail and asks that the state Legislature place the issue back on the ballot.

**Voting yes to support the resolution:** Supervisors Andreas Borgeas, Poochigian, Phil Larson.

**Voting no:** Supervisors Judy Case McNairy, Henry R. Perea.

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