

# Fresno City Hall torn over study for high-speed rail station

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By George Hostetter

A Fresno city FAX bus rolls along H Street at Mariposa Street in front of the Greyhound bus station in downtown Fresno Friday, Aug. 8, 2014. The location is approximately where the Fresno station of the proposed high speed rail will be built.

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The place that can't get its fill of plans is dragging its heels over whether to spend someone else's money for a study on the bullet train station.

Fresno City Hall is unsure if it should spend \$1 million in grants for a consultant who would tell city officials how downtown can maximize the benefits of high-speed rail.

City Council members and officials from the administration of Mayor Ashley Swearengin left the audience dazed after debating the issue recently.

The two sides most likely will go at it again on Aug. 21 when the council meets.

The basic issue is simple. The bullet train needs a station for arrivals and departures. Lots of details must be settled to make sure the hub runs smoothly. Life teaches it's best to plan ahead.

But station planning in Fresno has turned into a proxy for a bigger fight on the bullet train's life or death.

"I have ongoing concerns about the future of the high-speed rail project and where the funding is going to come from," said Council Member Clint Olivier, who opposed the station-planning grant at the council meeting on July 31.

Council Member Lee Brand supported the station plan, although he questions the wisdom of such an expensive project.

"We have so many significant issues before us — public safety, parks, infrastructure, water, on and on," Brand said. "I don't like symbolic votes of protest that divert our attention from things we must do to make our city better."

Two high-speed rail issues came to the council last month.

The council had to decide whether to award a \$1 million contract to AECOM Technical Services to produce a master plan for the area where a high-speed rail station would be created.

The money would come from two sources: \$120,000 from the Fresno Council of Governments, \$900,000 from the High-Speed Rail Authority.

The council awarded the contract on a 4-2 vote. Olivier and Council President Steve Brandau voted no. Council Member Paul Caprioglio was absent (vacation).

The council also had to appropriate the money. This step has a higher threshold — at least five votes.

The vote was 4-2. The no votes of Brandau and Olivier along with Caprioglio's absence was enough to kill (at least temporarily) the study and throw the council chamber into one of its periodic bouts of confusion.

Study supporters said the money comes from other agencies.

Study opponents said it's all taxpayer money.

Study supporters said the plan will be of value even if the bullet train never comes.

Study opponents said it's smart to wait until the bullet train survives legal challenges.

Study supporters said the council could fund some of the plan now and the rest later.

Study opponents said that made no sense.

City Hall has a case of nerves over high-speed rail.

High-speed rail officials some years ago always faced an appreciative council when they showed videos of the proposed train. Everyone saw trains zooming at 220 mph, bringing passengers, wealth and revitalization to downtown Fresno.

But as dream turned to action, the faith of some council members faded. They saw a long construction period. They feared disrupted commerce and frustrated commuters. They smelled construction trouble at City Hall's expense.

The July 31 debate typified that love-hate relationship with the bullet train.

The new station is slated for the intersection of Mariposa and H streets, at the northern edge of the Greyhound bus terminal. Details are scarce. No one, though, disputes that the station would be a dramatic addition to a dense urban area.

The master plan would essentially encompass everything within a half-mile radius of the station. Courthouse Park, the six-block Fulton Corridor, Chukchansi Park, Chinatown, Kearney Palms shopping center — they're all in the study area.

The master plan is to review (among many things) the potential for commercial and housing development. It will identify development barriers. It will suggest development strategies.

At the top of the Swearingin administration's must-do list for the plan is transportation. City officials don't want people emerging from a 21st century bullet train in downtown Fresno only to confront a chaotic municipal transportation system.

The plan is to figure the best way to mesh high-speed rail with Fresno Area Express, Bus Rapid Transit, taxi service, charter buses, bicycles, personal cars and all the other ways people move around.

The master plan also must mesh with City Hall's other plans. The 2035 general plan (the overall blueprint for growth), the Fulton Corridor Specific Plan and a revised development code are all working their way through the pipeline.

All eyes on Aug. 21 will be on District 4's Caprioglio. City Manager Bruce Rudd last month said the study could be funded several ways. Grants already in hand could foot the entire bill. Or other money — perhaps the general fund — could be tapped.

The decision will be in your hands, Rudd told the council members.

General fund money goes largely to public safety, parks and street maintenance, things dear to any council member.

Spending general fund money on a high-speed train study, Caprioglio said Friday during the last days of his vacation, "would be very difficult for me."

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