

Fresno finally accepts \$1 million to plan high-speed rail station | High-Speed Rail

By George
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In an August file photo, a FAX bus rolls along H Street at Mariposa in front of the Greyhound bus station in downtown Fresno. The location is approximately where a station for the proposed high-speed rail system would be built.

CRAIG KOHLRUSS — THE FRESNO BEE [Buy Photo](#)

It took two months, but the Fresno City Council finally decided there's little downside to accepting a free million bucks.

The decision wasn't unanimous.

The council on Thursday voted 5-2 to spend \$1 million in grants for a consultant who will dig into all sorts of planning details connected to the proposed high-speed rail station in downtown.

Council President Steve Brandau and Council Member Clint Olivier voted no.

The money comes from federal and state sources plus the Fresno Council of Governments. Council Member Oliver Baines summed up the majority's position when he said appropriating the money "is the most responsible decision."

Brandau said he prefers to take the vote next spring when California has a better idea of whether high-speed rail will

live or die.

And there the matter might normally be viewed as done. The consultant is AECOM Technical Services. The firm's experts will study, among other things, how to maximize private-sector investment and optimize transportation options around the bullet train station proposed for a spot near Chukchansi Park. A report will be written, delivered to City Hall and merged into the opus that is becoming the 2035 general plan.

Yet Fresno's posterity will demand a thorough explanation for the council's circuitous journey to Thursday's verdict. For that, there isn't time.

But in a nutshell, things began July 31 when city officials plopped a two-part idea on the council dais. Part one was the AECOM contract. The council said yes. Part two was spending the grant money already in the pipeline. That required five votes because it was an appropriation.

Part two got four votes -- failure. Brandau and Olivier voted no. Council Member Paul Caprioglio was far away, enjoying a vacation.

Top executives in the administration of Mayor Ashley Swearengin came up with Plan B. They brought the appropriation request back to the council Aug. 21, when a rested Caprioglio had returned to the dais.

This time Brandau was absent. And this time the administration's defeat was even worse, 3-3. Caprioglio, the hoped-for fifth vote, turned out to be an emphatic no. Council Member Lee Brand switched sides and Olivier hadn't budged.

Everything simmered through Labor Day, the dog days of late summer and the opening of the Big Fresno Fair. Attempt No. 3 was launched Thursday. The administration would be seen as having a tin ear for politics or a top-notch lobbying operation.

The orderly retreat executed by Caprioglio and Brand indicates the latter. Both spent minutes saying what Baines had said in seconds: A sense of public responsibility demands spending the money.

The debate's final minutes were a fast-paced give-and-take not on AECOM's charge but on whether elected representatives in American democracy should pursue their conscience or their constituents' will.

This is what high-speed rail has done to Fresno City Hall.

Grizzlies consultant deal sails through

Also Thursday, the council approved a deal with veteran sports consultant Dan Barrett to help find a buyer for the Fresno Grizzlies Triple-A baseball team. Barrett will be paid from the general fund, but City Hall will be reimbursed from sale proceeds if Barrett strikes paydirt. Brand pulled the item from the consent calendar for discussion, but none of the council members had any questions.

In other action, the council:

- Approved a revision that will have the video policing auditor deliver a report every two years rather than annually.
- Held a workshop with Development and Resource Management Director Jennifer Clark on the regulation of signs. Everyone agreed Fresno needs better policies on public and private signs. Everyone agreed this won't be easy.
- Heard Dave Herb, Fresno County Democratic Central Committee liaison to the council, ask the council to do a better job of holding timed hearings as close as possible to the scheduled hour. Herb said it's a matter of common courtesy and good government. He said he will keep a sharp eye on the council's time-management skills.

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