

West Fresno group says more money needed for high-speed rail job training | High-Speed Rail

By Eryn Baldrice-Guy



An artist's depiction of a high-speed rail train zooming past downtown Fresno.

FRESNO BEE ILLUSTRATION

Church and community leaders from southwest Fresno said Monday they want to see more money from the state's high-speed rail project devoted to helping unemployed Central Valley residents get the training they need to work on the project.

They plan to make their case Tuesday at the monthly meeting of the California High-Speed Rail Authority board in Sacramento.

About 30 people from churches, community groups and the Service Employees International Union, calling themselves the Voice of Including Community Equitably or VOICE, gathered Monday night at the West Fresno Family Resource Center to express their frustration that more hasn't been done to train unemployed disadvantaged Valley residents for the project.

"The VOICE supports the high-speed rail and other infrastructure projects in as much as they play a role in making our communities better places to live," said the Reverend Richard Daniels, pastor of Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church and one of the group's leaders.

The Rev. Terone Dunbar, associate minister with Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church, said he had difficulty

applying recently for an apprenticeship program at an electrical union. Despite his college degree, the union made him prove he had received a B in a high school algebra course before they would give him an application. Dunbar, who is black, said he felt uncomfortable when he was interviewed by five white men, one of whom was standing over him asking him questions. Dunbar said his interview score placed him at No. 144 on the apprenticeship list.

While he hasn't gotten an apprenticeship through the union, with the help of the West Fresno Family Resource Center he got a job working at a solar plant in Tranquillity that he hopes could help him eventually land a permanent job.

Members of the group said they don't want training standards lowered, but they want to ensure that the high-speed rail project allocates enough job training dollars to ensure economically disadvantaged people are not overlooked.

The Fresno Regional Workforce Investment Board has taken the lead on linking workers to apprenticeships with the help of state grant funds.

But Leroy Candler with SEIU said the Workforce Investment Board has not trained enough people. He said the board received a \$1.5 million state grant to fund worker training, but has only trained 22 workers.

Blake Konczal, executive director of the Fresno County Workforce Investment Board, said that the \$1.5 million grant was distributed among five counties: Fresno, Stanislaus, Mono, Inyo and Kern. Fresno County received \$500,000 for pre-apprenticeship training, Konczal said.

To date, he said, 100 trainees from Fresno have been accepted into the program. Konczal cited lack of construction on the rail project as why few high-speed rail jobs have materialized so far. .

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