

Progress remains slow on property acquisition for high-speed rail

By Tim Sheehan

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- Rail authority meeting

The California High-Speed Rail Authority will meet at 9 a.m. Tuesday at the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors chambers, 700 H St. in Sacramento.

The board's Finance & Audit Committee will meet at 8 a.m., prior to the full board meeting. Both sessions are open to the public.

The meeting agendas are available online at hsr.ca.gov/Board/monthly_brdmtg.html.

The 9 a.m. session will be webcast live at hsr.ca.gov/Board/live_meeting.html.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority is making painstakingly slow progress assembling the land it needs for its first 29-mile segment from northeast of Madera to the southern edge of Fresno.

It got the green light Friday from the state Public Works Board for the possible condemnations of 10 pieces of property in Madera and Fresno counties.

But it needs 525 parcels in hand. And as of late October, the agency had delivered fewer than 75 parcels to its contractor for construction of the bullet-train route and structures like over- and underpasses and bridges.

The figures are contained in a progress report being presented Tuesday to the rail authority's board of directors in Sacramento. The number of parcels legally in the hands of contractors represents about 6% of what's needed for the backbone of the statewide rail network: about 1,330 parcels over about 120 miles of the central San Joaquin Valley from Madera to northwest of Bakersfield.

Friday's action by the Public Works Board clears the way for the state to go to court under eminent domain law to take properties the rail authority has been unable to reach agreement on for price or terms of purchase. The vote brings to 55 the number of parcels for which the board — made up of the heads of the state's Finance, Transportation and General Services departments — has adopted resolutions of necessity to condemn. While it appears that few, if any, of the eminent domain cases have been filed with the superior courts in either Fresno or Madera counties, a spokeswoman for the rail agency said that six owners had come to terms since resolutions were adopted for their land.

Also on Friday, the Public Works Board approved site selection for 102 parcels needed for about 15 miles of rail route through southern Kings County, from Highway 198 east of Hanford to Newmark Avenue at the north edge of Corcoran. That approval clears the way for the rail authority to begin formal negotiations with those property owners. Since mid-2013, the board has approved more than 950 parcels for the rail project.

In a progress report to the rail agency's finance committee, the authority's staff acknowledges that work on the first 29 miles of construction "is lagging behind what was planned."

"Delays in construction activity are being driven primarily by the lack of adequate (right of way) to start work," the report states. "This metric will improve once the Contractor starts construction and the value of their monthly invoice increases." The construction team, comprised of Tutor Perini Corp. of Sylmar, Zachry Construction of Texas and

Pasadena-based Parsons Corp., last year won the Madera-Fresno project with a bid of about \$1 billion.

The rail agency is evaluating bids for its second construction package, a stretch of about 60 miles from the south end of Fresno to the Tulare-Kern county line. Three teams of contracting firms submitted proposals, but the price of their bids won't be revealed until after the bids have been evaluated for their technical capacity to perform the work. That segment is expected to cost \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion.

In a memo to the rail authority board, deputy chief program director Scott Jarvis said the agency hopes to issue a request for qualifications from contractors this week to gauge industry interest in building the third construction stage, from the Tulare-Kern county line to northeast of Bakersfield. The statements of qualifications from contractors will be used to create a short list of builders who are deemed eligible to submit bids for the project next year. Engineers for the rail authority estimate that the segment will cost between \$700 million and \$800 million to build.

A final construction stage in the Valley would include finishing up the rail bed and laying steel tracks over the entire 120-mile span of the first three packages.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority has about \$6 billion available for construction in the Valley — a combination of federal stimulus and transportation funds and money from Proposition 1A, a bond measure approved by California voters in 2008. But a good portion of the federal money comes with strings that require the Valley segments to be substantially completed by Sept. 30, 2017.

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