

# State will finally break ground in Fresno on high-speed rail construction

By Tim Sheehan



Conceptual view of high speed rail.

## SPECIAL TO THE BEE

The California High-Speed Rail Authority will officially break ground next month in Fresno on construction of its statewide bullet-train route.

The Jan. 6 groundbreaking ceremony, announced Friday afternoon, comes about a year and a half after the agency awarded its first construction contract, a \$1 billion deal to design and build the first 29-mile section from Madera to the south end of Fresno. Since the contract was signed in August 2013, the construction consortium of Tutor Perini/Zachry/Parsons has been engineering and designing the work. Subcontractors began demolishing some buildings and clearing parcels last summer as the rail authority slowly began acquiring the land needed for the right of way.

Neither a time nor location have been named for the ceremony. Earlier this year, representatives of the contracting team said that the first tangible construction was likely to happen in Madera, where an elevated bridge will be built to span the Fresno River and Highway 145 on the eastern edge of the city. Engineers with the rail authority, in the meantime, suggested that the first construction would occur in downtown Fresno.

The formal start of construction has been years in the making. California voters approved Proposition 1A, a \$9.9 billion bond measure to help finance a high-speed rail system, in November 2008. But it wasn't until the fall of 2010, when the Obama administration and the Federal Railroad Administration directed more than \$3 billion in federal stimulus and transportation grants to California to begin construction in the central San Joaquin Valley, that the project began to move off the drawing board.

The rail board approved its Merced-Fresno route segment in May 2012, except for a portion around Chowchilla where the agency continues to evaluate route options. That's where part of the line will branch off through the Pacheco Pass to the San Francisco Peninsula.

Between the federal money and bond funds from Prop. 1A, the rail agency has about \$6 billion available to build the backbone of its system from Merced to Bakersfield. But that's less than 10% of the estimated \$68 billion cost to span the statewide system's first 520-mile phase from Los Angeles to San Francisco by 2028 or 2029. The state hopes to begin carrying passengers on its first operational segment between Merced and the Los Angeles basin — a span estimated to cost about \$31 billion — by the early 2020s.

Just where the rest of the money will come from is uncertain. While state legislators agreed this fall to allocate 25% of annual cap-and-trade money — funds paid to California by companies for credits to offset their air pollution emissions — starting next year, the Valley's Republican representatives in Congress have vowed to block any more federal money for the project. The rail authority said it anticipates that private industry will eventually step up to invest in the project, and while a number of companies have expressed interest in participating, none have put forth concrete proposals to date.

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