

Central Valley Job Seekers Pin High Hopes on High-Speed Rail

Alice Daniel



More than 100 people, most of them out of work, packed a community center in the rural farming town of Orange Cove recently for a workshop on how to get jobs building the nation's first high-speed rail train.

When the [California High-Speed Rail Authority](#) project — which breaks ground Jan. 6 in Fresno — starts laying down track, it will need ironworkers, laborers, cement masons, carpenters and more.

The project will create a statewide system totaling 800 miles and up to 24 stations, including trains from San Francisco to the L.A. basin in under three hours by 2029. However, it has faced many obstacles: lawsuits, political wrangling and big questions about its funding and future.

But some Central Valley residents see the promise of rail construction jobs as a pathway out of poverty. The idea of building something that will last appeals to Ruben Galvez, an unemployed farmworker who is at the Fresno County workshop.

"There's not too much work here in the Central Valley," he says. "It's a lot of agriculture base, so maybe this will take people out of the fields and maybe give them a steadier job. Instead of working six months out of the year, they'll be able to work, you know, the whole year."

'We have the single-largest public infrastructure project in the history of California coming through the poorest parts of our state.' *Blake Konczal, director, Fresno Regional Workforce Investment Board*

But finding a job with the rail is a multi-step process, especially if you don't have experience with a trade. Galvez can sign up on a rail jobs website — and then wait for a call back. If he passes math and English literacy requirements, a

drug test, an interview and a fitness test, he may be eligible for a free pre-apprenticeship training program.

“It’s a little bit of a tricky process,” says Elizabeth Jonasson, an information officer with the authority. Getting a job requires going through the right channels.

“It’s not directly with us as a state government,” she says. “It’s through the contractors, subcontractors, even businesses that supply materials and such. And a lot of those construction workers, the vast majority, will be dispatched from the unions.”

She means the building trades unions, which have apprenticeship programs to train workers for the rail jobs she expects will ramp up in a few months — ground prep, demolition, engineering and construction.

“There’s going to be a sudden explosion of people that we need,” says Jonasson. “And we want to make sure they are all qualified, in the pipe, ready to go.”

The unions signed an agreement with the High-Speed Rail Authority to hire workers from federally designated impoverished census tracts for about a [third of the project’s work hours](#). Most of Fresno County fits that bill, with some of the highest unemployment rates in the state. The agreement also includes hiring a subset of disadvantaged workers, including the chronically unemployed, veterans, single mothers and former inmates.

“We have the single-largest public infrastructure project in the history of the state of California coming through the poorest parts of our state,” says Blake Konczal, director of the [Fresno Regional Workforce Investment Board](#). He lobbied hard for the agreement and estimates that, at the peak of construction, it will help a minimum of 5,000 workers get hired — and these jobs pay well for the Central Valley. But first, people have to be trained.

“This is the sheet metal workers union hall and classroom. We’re sort of turning it into a working university here,” says Pat Barr. She runs the workforce’s pre-apprenticeship program, which introduces candidates to different trades and tutors them in math and communication skills.

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Patrick McCarthy, 33, recently finished the program and now has an apprenticeship with the laborers union, making \$22 an hour plus benefits. Before this training, he couldn’t find a decent-paying job because of a prison record for burglary. But now he’s busy prepping the ground for the rail line.

“I’m working on the potholing for them right now,” says McCarthy. “That’s where we find the utilities buried in the ground, so excavators don’t hit them.”



Gov. Jerry Brown stands next to construction workers and elected officials after signing legislation authorizing initial construction of California’s \$68 billion high-speed rail line on July 18, 2012 in Los Angeles. (Kevork Djansezian/Getty Images)

But McCarthy is unusual. About 100 people have completed the pre-apprenticeship program in Fresno County. Most of them are working on other kinds of construction jobs, waiting for January's groundbreaking of the high-speed rail project in Fresno, hoping it will soon pick up steam.

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