

Year in Review: Transportation

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An artist's rendering shows the high-speed rail train traveling through Fresno. Work begins January 6, 2015. Long mired in delays before judges and government boards, high-speed rail planners cheered victories this past year, even as opposition lingered.

Two years after approving environmental documents for the first 65-mile section of the bullet train from Merced to Fresno, the California High-Speed Rail Authority came back in May this year to clear the project 114 miles further south to Bakersfield.

The agency also awarded a \$71.86 million contract to ARCADIS U.S., Inc. to manage construction of the rail from Fresno toward Bakersfield.

Though later than first anticipated, some construction work even began this year when the Hollywood Inn bar in Fresno was demolished July 14, the first building razed to make way for construction of California's proposed high-speed rail line.

Now the authority is planning a groundbreaking, commemorating the start of sustained construction, in Fresno on Jan. 6, 2015.

And in August, the State Public Works Board approved the selection of nearly 160 parcels in Fresno and Kings counties for eventual acquisition for the project and the federal Surface Transportation Board authorized construction between Fresno and Bakersfield.

Even the State Supreme Court in October decided not to consider an appeal of a case brought by Kings County and

local landowners who sued the state last year over its clearance of the project's first section.

However, the \$68-billion project was dealt a symbolic setback in July when the Fresno County Board of Supervisors voted to withdraw their support of high-speed rail, siding with opponents challenging its adherence to Proposition 1A, which provides for \$9.9 billion in bonds for the project.

That follows a poll by the Probolsky Research earlier in the year in which 68 of 129 surveyed voters in the Central Valley said they would support an initiative blocking high-speed rail now that original construction cost estimates have doubled from \$33 billion dollars to \$68 billion.

All appeared to be well in the skies as passenger traffic at the Fresno Yosemite International Airport increased by 4.3 percent in the first half of 2014 over the year before. That's even after posting a record 1.4 million passengers in 2013, breaking its previous record in 2007 by 6.3 percent.

And although Frontier Airlines announced it would be ending its service between Fresno and Denver in early 2015, Allegiant Airlines announced plans to pick up the slack with five weekly flights to the city and Alaska Airlines added a third daily flight from Fresno to Seattle in September

Farther south, the City of Visalia decided to let go of Great Lakes Airlines, which has served its municipal airport for the last six years, in favor of daily service to Oakland, Burbank and San Diego.

For the time being, however, it appeared that Valley commuters still have a strong vested interest in vehicles.

Fresno, for instance, placed at No. 8 among 50 of the nation's largest metros in a list compiled by consumer information website NerdWallet in how accommodating cities are to drivers.

Even electric vehicles gained a foothold in the San Joaquin Valley. From June 2013 to May 2014, 776 rebates were issued in the Valley from the state's Clean Vehicle Rebate Project compared to 287 the prior year and just 75 the year before that.

And according to the 2014 California Green Innovation Index, registrations of zero-emissions vehicles in the region totaled 1,300 in 2012, an increase of 30 percent from the year before.

Many in Fresno were holding the hope of cutting greenhouses gas emissions through a bus rapid transit project designed to increase ridership along the Blackstone Avenue and Ventura Avenue corridors with 60-foot buses, elevated bus stops and exclusive bus lanes.

What the Fresno City Council ultimately voted on in March was a scaled back system that would include seven new 40-foot buses, upgraded "at grade" bus shelters, 10-minute wait times at stops and new queue jumper lanes at five intersections at a cost of around \$37 million from a federal grant.

Fresno was introduced to another novel concept in transportation this year when Internet-based ridesharing services Uber and Lyft launched in the city, connecting riders to nearby drivers with the tap of its smartphone app.

Though upsetting local cab companies and getting flack worldwide for presenting safety concerns and unfair competition, the San Francisco-based startups have both found a good fit in the Fresno area.

Uber has found partners in organizations like the Fresno Grizzlies and has been steadily cutting its prices in the area.

A November report by the R Street Institute gave Fresno an "A" grade for its friendliness to ridesharing services, with a legal framework allowing competition among ridesharing services and having issued no cease-and-desist orders for such companies to stop operating.

