

Symbolic groundbreaking Tuesday in Fresno for high-speed rail project

By Tim Sheehan



California High-Speed Rail Authority board members Dan Richard, left, and Mike Rossi, appear at a 2011 news conference. The authority plans a ceremonial groundbreaking for the statewide project on Tuesday, Jan. 6 in downtown Fresno.

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The California High-Speed Rail Authority expects that millions among the traveling public will want to ride its sleek, 220-mph bullet trains between the Bay Area and the Los Angeles Basin when the system starts running in the early 2020s.

But Tuesday's ceremonial groundbreaking in Fresno for the controversial rail project — considered one of the largest public works efforts in California history — will be an invitation-only affair for about 1,200 dignitaries and guests. The festivities are set for noon at the northeast corner of Tulare and G streets, the site of a planned high-speed train station in downtown Fresno.

Among those scoring an invite is Gov. Jerry Brown, who will attend the event just a day after he is sworn in for a fourth term as part of a busy inauguration week.

The formalities represent a symbolic milestone for the rail authority, and one that comes more than two years after what was once targeted for the start of construction. California voters approved Proposition 1A, a \$9.9 billion high-

speed rail bond act, in November 2008. In 2010, when the Federal Railroad Administration announced that the Obama administration was pledging more than \$3 billion in federal stimulus and transportation money to California's high-speed train project (to be matched with money from Prop. 1A), officials touted a schedule that called for construction to commence in September 2012.

The fall of 2012 came and went while the rail authority was seeking bids for companies to design and build the first construction segment of the statewide system, a 29-mile stretch from the northeast edge of Madera to the southern fringe of Fresno. A consortium of contractors, Tutor Perini/Zachry/Parsons, submitted the low bid of about \$1 billion in early 2013; a contract with the team was inked in August 2013.

The bidding process wasn't the only thing that stalled the schedule. The rail authority and the state have been targeted by a smattering of lawsuits challenging various aspects of the project, from the adequacy of environmental analyses for the Madera-Fresno and Fresno-Bakersfield segments of the route to whether Prop. 1A bonds could be sold to finance construction, from challenges of a 2011 draft financing plan to whether the rail system in its current proposed incarnation will be able to fulfill Prop. 1A requirements for a trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles in 2 hours 40 minutes or be able to operate only on its self-sustaining income without any public subsidy.

It has also taken longer than expected for the rail authority to acquire the property it needs and to string together enough parcels to accommodate major construction. Engineers with Tutor Perini/Zachry/Parsons began work on designing the route soon after their contract was signed in mid-2013. But it wasn't until last July that subcontractors were able to begin clearing parcels and demolishing buildings along the route. As of mid-December, the rail authority owns 101 of the 525 pieces of property needed for the Madera-Fresno segment. It also needs 539 parcels for its second construction segment, about 65 miles from the south edge of Fresno to the Tulare-Kern county line.

What hasn't changed since the federal grants began flowing four years ago is a Sept. 30, 2017, deadline for substantial completion of the rail sections in the San Joaquin Valley. That's the date by which the state rail authority must spend its federal money. The rail authority has about \$6 billion — a combination of the federal funds and matching Prop. 1A money — available to build the backbone of its system from Merced to Bakersfield. That's a little under 20% of the \$31 billion that it's expected to cost to build the first operational segment between Merced and Burbank by the early 2020s. It's also less than 10% of the anticipated \$68 billion cost to build the 520-mile Phase 1 system from San Francisco to Los Angeles by the late 2020s.

Despite the downtown Fresno setting for Tuesday's ceremony, the first major construction on the Madera-Fresno segment is anticipated to be at the eastern edge of Madera, where an elevated bridge will be built to span the Fresno River, Highway 145 and Raymond Road just west of the existing BNSF Railway freight tracks. Downtown Fresno is expected to be the site of some other early work, including relocation of utilities to make way for construction.

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