

Workshops focus on high-speed rail junction options near Chowchilla

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An artist's depiction of a California high-speed rail train

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The California High-Speed Rail Authority will hold open-house presentations of route options in the Chowchilla / Fairmead area in Madera and Merced counties.

- **In Chowchilla:** 4:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Chowchilla Fairgrounds Little Theater, 1000 S. Third St.
- **In Fairmead:** 4:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Fairmead Elementary School cafeteria, 19421 Avenue 223/4.

Planners and consultants will be on hand with maps to answer questions from residents about three route alternatives being studied for a Y-shaped junction of rail lines through the Valley and from the Bay Area. A brief presentation is planned at 6 p.m. at each meeting.

Details, questions: (559) 248-6373 or email central.valley@hsr.ca.gov.

- High-speed rail plan

- Phase 1 plans for California's high-speed rail project calls for connecting San Francisco and Los Angeles, by way of the San Joaquin Valley, with electric trains capable of carrying passengers at speeds up to 220 mph.
- The project is planned to be built in stages, the first of which is in the Valley between Merced and Bakersfield at a cost of about \$6 billion.
- The first operational segment would begin carrying passengers when the route is extended southward from Bakersfield through Palmdale and into the San Fernando Valley, planned in about 2022. The estimated cost for the first operational segment is about \$31 billion.
- Later stages of Phase 1 would extend tracks from the San Joaquin Valley westward over the Pacheco Pass to Gilroy and San Jose, where high-speed trains would continue on Caltrain commuter-rail tracks into downtown San Francisco. In Southern California, the line would be extended to Los Angeles and Anaheim. Phase 1 is planned to reach completion, with a one-train ride from San Francisco to Los Angeles/Anaheim, in 2028. The total Phase 1 cost is estimated at \$68 billion.
- Phase 2 extensions, for which there is currently no timetable or cost estimate for development, would reach north from Merced to Sacramento and from Los Angeles to San Diego by way of the Inland Empire (San Bernardino/Riverside).

Residents in the Chowchilla and Fairmead areas of Madera County will learn about possible high-speed rail routes through and around their area in a pair of open-house presentations next week by the [California High-Speed Rail Authority](#).

What was once described by a Chowchilla city leader as a "spaghetti bowl" of alternatives through and around the community for a Y-shaped junction of bullet-train tracks has been narrowed to three options that are being evaluated for their environmental and economic consequences. Those options will be presented at workshops Tuesday night in Chowchilla and Wednesday night in Fairmead.

The junction of tracks from San Jose into the San Joaquin Valley, called the [Central Valley Wye](#), is part of the first route section between Fresno and Merced that was approved by the rail agency for its 520-mile rail system between San Francisco and Los Angeles. When the authority's board approved that stretch of the route in May 2012, it left out the area around Chowchilla so options for the junction could go through more detailed study.

Under the alternatives being considered, the north-south backbone of the rail line diverges from the Highway 99 / Union Pacific Railroad corridor north of Chowchilla and bypasses the city. The east-west tracks that branch off toward

San Jose would connect with the Valley backbone south of Chowchilla.

Two of the junction options call for the east-west tracks to follow Highway 152 as they approach Chowchilla. In one scenario, the junction would occur west of Chowchilla, along Road 13. The other Highway 152 alternative joins the north-south line east of Chowchilla, at about Road 19.

In the third option, the east-west line would approach a little further south, along Avenue 23, with the junction to the north-south tracks happening along Road 13 west of Chowchilla.

All three options join with the already-approved route near Avenue 17 and the BNSF Railway tracks at the northeast edge of Madera. The Fresno-Merced section of the statewide high-speed train route is a hybrid of potential lines between the two cities, ranging between the Highway 99 / Union Pacific corridor and the BNSF corridor a few miles to the east.

At one time, as many as 14 route combinations were on the drawing board in and around Chowchilla for the wye junction. Chowchilla leaders were concerned about routes that disrupted the city's traffic patterns and future development plans. The city sued the rail authority in 2012 over those fears, stating in court documents that any east-west routes to the Bay Area along Avenue 24 south of Chowchilla would span an area identified for annexation by the city for commercial, entertainment and industrial development, while a north-south route along Highway 99 would create a barrier dividing the city. A route along the highway also would be the most expensive option for the rail authority to build, costing nearly \$500 million more than the second-costliest alternative, according to court documents.

The city and the rail agency settled that lawsuit in early 2013, and the three options that remain on the table reflect the agency's acknowledgment of Chowchilla's concerns.

Elizabeth Jonasson, a spokeswoman for the rail authority's Central Valley region office in Fresno, said the agency expects to issue a draft environmental impact report for the wye alternatives this fall for public comment. That draft report could name a preferred option for route. A final version of the report, which will include responses to the public comments — and possibly adjustments based on that feedback — will likely be released in mid-2016 and presented to the rail authority's board for certification and final approval of a route by the end of next year.

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