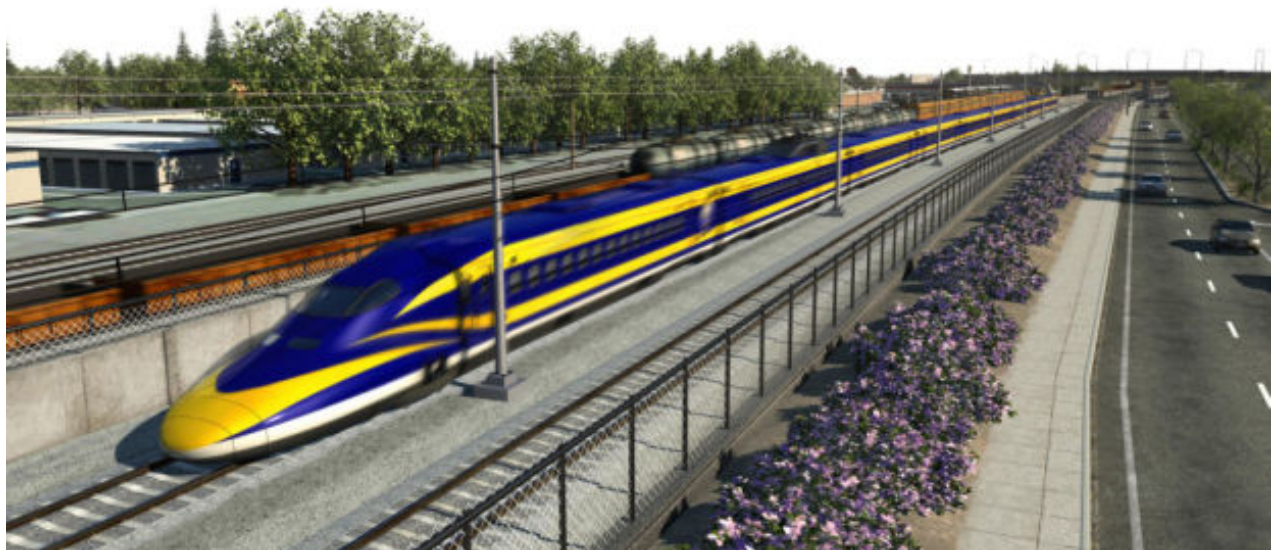


County nixes proposed cooperation with HSR

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Reporter



Contributed

An artist rendition of a high speed rail train in the Central Valley.

HSR

Kings EDC head said funding available for business relocation, assistance

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Kings County supervisors have been adamant about their opposition to high-speed rail, and a vote at Tuesday's board meeting was no exception.

The supervisors unanimously rejected a proposal from John Lehn, Kings County Economic Development Corp. CEO, to enter into discussions with California High-Speed Rail Authority officials to fund a business relocation assistance program for any local enterprises that might be forced to move by the current alignment.

It wasn't lost on anybody that Kings County is deep into a multi-front legal war against the authority to stop the project in its current form.

"As we fight this project, I didn't want to be in a position to accept their money and appear to be working toward one

goal, when obviously our efforts have been toward the hope that they properly plan the project, if not stop it," said Supervisor Richard Valle.

Valle said that once he learned that the county would have to contract directly with the authority to get the program off the ground, he decided to vote "no."

"I just felt that, historically, based on the relationship that Kings County has with the [authority], there's zero trust," he said. "Any relocation problems due to their alignment through Kings County, it's their mess to clean up."

An authority spokeswoman couldn't be immediately reached for comment.

Lehn said he was merely seeking guidance from supervisors on whether to initiate contact with rail officials.

"There was no offer of the funds formally [from the authority]," Lehn said. "It was more, "Is this something that you would like me to pursue?," and the answer was, "No."

The high-speed rail alignment cuts through farms, dairies and some residences in Kings County, but it's not clear how many businesses, if any, would be eligible for funding under the authority's assistance program.

According to authority documents, the program would only apply to businesses or farms that actually moved as a result of high-speed rail construction. The documents state that businesses forced to move can be reimbursed for certain expenses.

Eminent domain law requires that owners be fairly compensated for all property taken for the construction of a public project such as high-speed rail.

Valle and Lehn both said no specific businesses were mentioned in Tuesday's discussion.

Larry Spikes, Kings County administrative officer, said he was concerned that the authority would use any cooperative agreement as a public relations ploy.

"We have multiple legal options going on against them," Spikes said.

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