

Critics fear bullet train will bring urban sprawl to Central Valley

By Ralph
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Against a rural tableau draped in a gray winter sky, a fleet of heavy, clawing earth movers rumbles back and forth across a fallow, 953-acre field that for decades produced bell peppers, carrots and alfalfa.

Gossamer Grove, a planned development of 3,432 homes just north of Bakersfield between irrigation canals and a busy freight track, is among the largest residential projects in the Central Valley. A mix of housing styles starting at \$250,000 is aimed at young, growing families on a budget, those looking for big yards and garages that can accommodate two or three cars.

It's the sort of construction that many government officials, environmentalists and urban planners have been discouraging: outer-edge, single-family subdivisions that have defined growth in California for the last half-century.

High-speed rail through Central Valley

Gov. Jerry Brown says he has a powerful new weapon in the battle against such sprawl: The \$68-billion California High-Speed Rail system. The bullet train, the governor believes, will help concentrate expected growth in existing population centers of the Central Valley, sparing farm fields.

"We can't keep paving over agricultural land," Brown said at a Fresno groundbreaking ceremony last month.

Whether the project can contain sprawl is uncertain at best, according to a number of land-use experts and Central Valley elected leaders.

Many farming industry leaders contend it's more likely that the project will trigger a development boom that will overwhelm efforts to corral growth.

The bullet train would connect Fresno to Silicon Valley by a one-hour train ride, and Bakersfield to Los Angeles in about the same amount of time, making both farming centers potential bedroom communities for the state's urban megacenters. Home buyers priced out of coastal California could find the Central Valley more affordable and more attractive, some analysts say.

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"To hear all of the civic boosters in the Central Valley talk, this is going to create a new Gold Rush," said Edward Thompson Jr., California director of the American Farmland Trust, a national group that seeks to preserve farmland.

In France, about half of the development and resulting population growth attributed to high-speed rail ended up in formerly rural farmland, Thompson said. And the Central Valley is at risk for similar losses.

"Right now the policies are not strong enough to keep growth in the downtowns," he added.

The chairman of the state high-speed rail authority, Dan Richard, said the project will help prevent the loss of farmland. But he acknowledged it may unleash new economic forces.

"I don't disagree it could accelerate growth," Richard said.

That makes it particularly important, he said, for Central Valley cities to concentrate development in already urbanized areas.

The bullet train's backers have long embraced a vision that the system's stations will stimulate nearby, mixed-use residential and commercial construction that would reduce dependence on cars. Indeed, state-commissioned promotional videos show sleek blue-and-yellow trains gliding into futuristic stations in Fresno and other cities, followed by high-rise buildings pushing up all around in time-lapse animation.

Smart growth planning

Smart-growth proponents say high-speed rail stations could become magnets for investments in downtown areas. But they stress that preventing sprawl depends almost entirely on city and county planning policies.

"There are a lot of variables that will determine the outcome," said Michael Woo, dean of Cal Poly Pomona's college of environmental design and chairman of Smart Growth America, a national advocacy group. "The technology of high-speed rail doesn't have much to do with it."

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Farm industry leaders say the state's planning process failed to adequately address the potential for the bullet train system to increase development pressures and accelerate the loss of farmland.

"Any time you bring fast, efficient transportation to outlying areas you bring the possibility of faster growth," said Chris Scheuring, an environmental attorney at the California Farm Bureau. "Developers are going to respond to that."

Rep. Jeff Denham, a Turlock almond farmer and the Republican chairman of the House subcommittee that oversees railroads, is among the critics arguing that the state's predictions about the project are flat wrong.

"No doubt it will increase urbanization," he said. "Making the claim that high-speed rail is going to benefit the agriculture industry is not only off base, it is unsupportable."

Even without the bullet train, the Central Valley is poised for significant growth. The state projects an 85% jump in population to 7.4 million residents by 2060 in the eight counties that comprise the southern end of the Central Valley.

In the mid-20th century, California saw the development of a different transportation system — and related sprawl fueled by population growth — decimate a major agricultural center: Los Angeles County.

It was the nation's leading agricultural county in 1949, producing milk, eggs, chickens, beef, fruits and vegetables. But as the vast tracts of rich alluvial soils in the San Gabriel and San Fernando valleys were crisscrossed by new freeways, farmland gave way to suburban developments and laid the foundation for the nation's second-largest city.

Within five years, the county slipped to the third-largest farming county and plummeted from there in just a generation.

Now, a major question is whether high-speed rail could play a similar role in the Central Valley. "It is a shocking prospect, but it is possible," Woo said. "The economic stakes are astronomical."

California agriculture hit record annual production of \$45 billion in 2013, making it one of the state's biggest industries. It employs about 450,000 people, vastly more than the entertainment business, supplies half of the fruits and vegetables consumed by Americans and accounts for 80% of the world's almond market.

Protecting that economic asset against potential threats may not be easy. Low land costs in the Central Valley make it ideal for future residential growth.

Developer Darius Assemi's family has been building homes in Fresno for decades. The city is "poised for incredible growth," he said, partly because high-speed rail will make the area an affordable alternative for Silicon Valley workers. Many such workers now spend hours on Bay Area freeways commuting to inland homes.

Assemi serves on an urban development task force formed by Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin, a Republican proponent of the bullet train, and he supports the kind of "in-fill" projects the state and environmentalists want. His firm Granville Homes, has built blocks of Fresno apartment buildings.

But the hunt for urban plots suitable for development is growing more difficult, he said. And buyer demand is pulling builders toward lower-rise residential projects in newer communities, with better schools, he said.

"As soon as they have kids, they want to have a single-family home in a better part of town," he said. "They want to raise their kids in a backyard, not on a balcony."

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Swearengin said in an interview that "the No. 1 threat to ag land is urban sprawl." A recently adopted plan creates a 9,000-acre agricultural preserve in her city and seeks to funnel future growth into less fertile land west of downtown.

Swearengin discounts the governor's argument that the bullet train will help preserve farmland, saying that's a "minor point" in support of the project. The bullet train will make it easier for Central Valley residents to do business elsewhere in the state, she said, but she doubts it will lure many Bay Area commuters to Fresno.

Debate over land use

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Many Central Valley civic leaders bristle at the state's assumptions. Tony Boren, executive director of the Fresno Council of Governments, grows organic raisins on 80 acres. He said the state's plans are at odds with the traditional homes that many families, particularly larger Latino ones, want.

"They are trying to convince these young Hispanic families that it is in everybody's best interest for them to live in these dense apartments," he said. "But the reality is they want the same thing that earlier generations had."

Officials in Kern County dismiss both the idea the bullet train will help its agriculture industry and that increasing urban density is a desirable goal. "We are being told by people who live outside of our community how we should live," said Lorelei H. Oviatt, director of the Kern County planning and community development department. "If you live in Santa Monica and love to walk to get your morning coffee, it makes perfect sense that the rest of California should look like that."

How serious a threat urban sprawl poses to the state's agricultural land — and whether the high-speed rail system offers significant protection — is a complex and controversial issue.

Why you should embrace the \$68-billion California bullet train project

Since 1950 in California, land dedicated to farming has decreased by almost one-third, according to Department of Agriculture figures. But in the last six years, there has been no net loss of farmland, state reports show.

A revolution in agricultural technology has led to skyrocketing crop yields, meaning less acreage produces more food.

"Land is not a constraint in Central Valley farming," said Roberta Cook, an agricultural economist at UC Davis. "What drives how much we produce in fruits and vegetables is consumer demand, not land availability."

What's in store?



Many growers and valley officials contend cutbacks in water rights have removed tens of thousand of acres from production and are a far bigger problem than urbanization.

Shawn Stevenson's 1,200-acre Harlan Ranch Co. in Fresno bulldozed 400 acres of citrus, nut and olive trees because they were withering away. "Why do we need to conserve farmland if there is no water for the crops?" he asked.

That's the sort of question repeated as bullet train construction nears and state officials, local leaders, environmentalists, builders and growers prepare for divergent visions of the Central Valley's future.

Mike Miller thinks the outlook is fairly clear. He's a division vice president with Lennar Homes of California, one of the valley's biggest builders, and the developer of Gossamer Grove.

Renderings of the community show a meandering grid of schools, parks, businesses, green belts and two-story homes, surrounded by large open tracts of land —calling to mind early phases of past building booms in Orange, Riverside or Ventura counties.

"I don't see how high-speed rail is going to change density," Miller said. "People still want single-family homes."

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