

Lawmakers shrug off charges that state is botching high-speed rail land acquisition

Allen Young

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California High-Speed Rail Authority

Complaints from Central Valley residents that the state has made missteps in acquiring private property for high-speed rail failed to convince lawmakers to investigate the matter.

Complaints from Central Valley residents that the state has botched the acquisition of land for high-speed rail failed to convince lawmakers last week that the matter deserved further investigation.



A legislative panel nixed a request from Sen. [Andy Vidak](#), a Fresno Republican, to run a state audit on the [California High-Speed Rail Authority](#) for its handling of the eminent domain process. The vote mostly fell along party lines, with Democrats largely opposed to the idea.

Before the vote, lawmakers heard stories from aggrieved Central Valley property owners of getting short shrift by the state.

Attorneys representing property owners in the path of the train accuse the state of conduct that ranges from the unlawful -- allegedly issuing property appraisals without first engaging owners in the process, for example -- to the unethical, such as pressing owners to sign condemnation documents before a train route is finalized.

"It's unusual, and in my opinion it is improper and may fringe on being illegal," said [C. William Brewer](#), a Fresno attorney representing several clients with cases against the authority.

The rail authority maintains that it has acted in strict accordance of federal and state laws. In a letter to lawmakers last week, authority CEO [Jeff Morales](#) said any substantiated charge of coercion in the eminent domain process would lead to an immediate dismissal of the responsible agent.

The authority is proud of its record on land acquisitions, said Morales, who added that some property owners found themselves in a better situation after moving through the process.

"While we know we can always improve, we are proud of the fact that the authority has been able to successfully complete the process with the vast majority of families and businesses whose properties have been acquired," Morales wrote.

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