

Heavy equipment finally moving on California high-speed rail construction

By Tim Sheehan
tsheehan@fresnobee.com

Heavy construction work on California's high-speed rail project formally commenced Tuesday in a dusty field next to a freight railroad line.

Work crews are building the first of 16 concrete footings that will become the foundation of a 1,600-foot viaduct, or elevated bridge, over the Fresno River, Highway 145 and Raymond Road. The construction "is the first visual that people can start seeing us building up," said Diana Gomez, Central Valley regional director for the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

The work is part of the authority's first construction segment in the state, a 29-mile stretch from the northeast edge of Madera to the south end of Fresno.

It comes two years after the agency awarded the \$1 billion contract for the section.

This is the first visual that people can start seeing us building up.

Diana Gomez, Central Valley regional director for the California High-Speed Rail Authority

"To some people, this seems like it's been a long time coming," said Jeff Morales, the authority's CEO. But now, he added, work will accelerate, expanding to other sites in Fresno and Madera counties. "Over the next few months, people will see things happening at about a half-dozen different sites," Morales said. "By the end of the summer, you won't be able to go anywhere in the Valley without seeing people in orange vests and green shirts hard at work."

Gomez said it will likely take eight months to a year for workers to complete the Fresno River viaduct. She estimated that as many as 100 workers would have a hand in the construction at various stages of the work.

One of the hangups that delayed the start of construction was the slow pace at which the rail agency was able to acquire the land it needs for the right of way before its contracting team — Sylmar-based Tutor Perini Corp., Zachry Construction of Texas and Pasadena-based Parsons Corp. — could begin work. Earlier this year, Tutor Perini CEO Ron Tutor said he wanted to negotiate with the rail authority over compensation for a year-and-a-half delay in his firm's work. When asked about that desire Tuesday at the construction site, Tutor demurred: "We're not there yet."

Morales said that the agency and contractor "will work through issues as we tackle them." But for now, he added, "the focus is on getting to work, to make things happen."

As of last week, the authority has possession of more than 200 of the 536 parcels it needs in the Fresno-Madera section. It also has about 50 of the 543 parcels for right of way in its second construction segment, a 65-mile stretch from American Avenue at the south end of Fresno to the Tulare-Kern county line.

Gomez said that other major construction expected to get under way this summer are street over- and underpasses. Those include new underpasses at Tulare and Ventura streets in downtown Fresno and a rail crossing under Highway 180 just north of downtown Fresno.

Two more viaducts are part of Construction Package 1: a crossing over the San Joaquin River, Union Pacific Railroad and Golden State Boulevard at the north end Fresno; and a crossing over Golden State Boulevard, Cedar and North avenues and Highway 99 at the south end of Fresno.

Gomez said she expects work to begin soon on the Fresno-Tulare/Kern section, known as Construction Package 2-3. The rail authority awarded a \$1.37 billion contract in January to a construction team of Dragados USA Inc., a subsidiary of Spain's Grupo ACS and Dragados S.A.; Flatiron West Inc. of San Marcos in Southern California; and Shimmick Construction Co. of Oakland. Since that time, Shimmick Construction has left the consortium, but the rail agency said that won't affect the team's ability to build its portion of the project. The authority and contractors formally signed a contract late last week, and the authority has given the team a partial green light to begin its work, which will include designing the rail route structures as well as building them.

The construction sections in the Valley are planned as the backbone of a 520-mile, \$68 billion statewide bullet-train line connecting San Francisco and Los Angeles by way of Merced, Fresno, Bakersfield and Palmdale by 2028. Future extensions would run to Sacramento and San Diego.

Tim Sheehan: [\(559\) 441-6319](tel:(559)441-6319), [@TimSheehanNews](https://www.instagram.com/TimSheehanNews)