

Fresno County's Measure C may aid land purchase for high-speed rail maintenance site

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Fresno County leaders and the [California High-Speed Rail Authority](#) are forging ahead with plans for facilities to support the state's bullet-train line through the central San Joaquin Valley, with some important steps toward developing passenger stations and a major maintenance station potentially being taken by the end of this year.

For more than five years, county leaders have cast covetous glances at about 510 acres at Fresno's southern edge, along Cedar Avenue between Malaga and Adams avenues, as a proposed site for a heavy maintenance facility. Such a facility, which would serve as a central work site for assembling, testing and maintaining electric train sets for the statewide high-speed rail system, is coveted by Valley communities as an economic golden goose because of the estimated 1,500 jobs it would provide and its effect in attracting rail-related support industries to the region.

Now the county may be getting ready to put its money where its mouth is, and to do so sooner than expected. The [Fresno County Council of Governments](#), or Fresno COG, gave an informal green light Thursday night to a plan to advance \$750,000 from [Measure C](#) transportation sales tax money to reimburse a local developer for buying options on the property needed for the site.

"We know we're going to have to acquire the property," said Fresno County Supervisor Henry Perea, who also co-chairs [Fresno Works](#), an ad-hoc group of political, community and business leaders formed to persuade the state to choose Fresno as the site for the maintenance facility. "This just gets the ball rolling a little earlier. It's important to secure the options on the land."

Measure C advance

Several years ago, Fresno COG — a transportation-planning and policy organization that includes representatives from cities across the county — authorized earmarking \$25 million in money from Measure C, the county's half-cent transportation sales tax supplement, as an incentive to the state rail agency to select the Fresno site over competing proposals from Madera, Merced, Kings and Kern counties. That money would be available to the high-speed rail authority to advance the development of the maintenance facility. The catch is that the money is forthcoming only if the state selects the Fresno site. That's a choice that likely won't be made until early 2016, said Jeff Morales, the rail agency's CEO.

But renewed competition from Kern County is inspiring a request from Fresno Works to ask Fresno COG to allow up to \$750,000 in Measure C money to be used in advance of the site selection to begin purchasing property.

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Tony Boren, Fresno Council of Governments executive director

"Basically, there's a concern that Kern County is back in the competition with a site that's under one ownership, and



that might put us at a competitive disadvantage,” said Tony Boren, Fresno COG executive director. “Fresno Works believes this is one thing we can do to level the playing field.”

In a [July 8 letter](#), Fresno Works leaders — Perea, [Fresno County Economic Development Corporation](#) CEO Lee Ann Eager, Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin and San Joaquin Mayor Amarpreet Dhaliwal — said Kern County’s proposed one-parcel, one-owner site makes “development significantly easier for the Authority.”

“Currently, the site identified by Fresno Works consists of 17 independently owned parcels, adding to the complexity, cost and timing of overall development,” the quartet wrote. They said a developer is willing to purchase options on the individual pieces of property for the proposed maintenance facility — if the private money he uses for the deals is reimbursed up to \$750,000 from Measure C money.

Boren, who also heads Fresno Works’ real-estate committee, identified the developer as Tim Jones, a Fresno attorney and member of Gateway Village LLC, a development group that took over more than 2,000 acres of property for a proposed master-planned community in Madera County near Highway 41 and Avenue 12.

Boren said that 11 of the city representatives on hand Thursday supported advancing the money for the options, while representatives of Clovis and Mendota opposed it. The next step comes Aug. 12, when the proposal goes to the [Fresno County Transportation Authority](#), a committee that holds the Measure C purse strings. It will then return to Fresno COG for formal approval before one final round of approval by the transportation authority board, possibly in September.

“I’m feeling pretty confident that it will receive favorable review by (the transportation board) and will move forward,” Perea said Friday.

Station development

As Fresno County moves to shore up its chances for the maintenance facility, the rail authority anticipates that it may issue a request by the end of the year for contractors to submit proposals for the development of passenger stations in Fresno, Hanford, Merced and Bakersfield.

Diana Gomez, the Central Valley regional director for the rail authority, said one contract package is being planned to cover the architectural design, engineering and potentially construction of all four stations in the Valley. “We’re looking closely at what’s going to be needed (at the stations) right from opening day,” Gomez said.

In Merced and Fresno, plans are for high-speed train stations to be developed in the downtown areas. A Hanford station is planned to be built on the eastern outskirts of the city, near Highway 198 at a site that is easily reachable by travelers from Visalia. No site has been finalized yet for a station in Bakersfield.

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Jeff Morales, California High-Speed Rail Authority CEO

In Fresno, the state is working with city leaders who are developing plans for the area surrounding the station site bounded by Fresno, Tulare, G and H streets. “We’re not a decision-maker” for those area plans, said Morales, the rail agency’s CEO, “but we’re very much involved in their discussions” in anticipation that the station could serve not only as a boarding site for high-speed trains but also as a hub for other modes of transportation, including Greyhound Bus Lines’ intercity buses and Fresno’s local transit buses.

At the Fresno site, the station will need to essentially straddle not only the existing Union Pacific Railroad freight line through downtown Fresno as well as the new high-speed rail tracks, but also go up and over the historic Southern Pacific station that now houses offices. The main entrance would be on the H Street side of the station, but people

could also enter on the G Street side. A concourse will connect the two sides so passengers can reach the boarding platforms.

Morales said the rail authority “wants to make a statement” with the design of its Fresno station “because it’s going to be a focal point of downtown redevelopment for the city.” In addition to the bare necessities of ticket counters, turnstiles and boarding platforms, Morales said stations in Fresno and other cities could take cues from high-speed rail lines in other countries and lease space to retailers and businesses, creating a real-estate revenue source for the state “and becoming destinations and economic centers unto themselves.”

The Valley segment of the rail line from Merced to Bakersfield, for which major construction is beginning in the Fresno-Madera area, is planned as the backbone of a \$68 billion system that would ultimately connect San Francisco and Los Angeles with electric trains carrying passengers at up to 220 mph. The rail authority hopes to have its first operational stretch from Merced to Burbank running in 2022, extending to San Francisco and Los Angeles by 2028.

Future phases would extend tracks to Sacramento and San Diego, but no time frame has been suggested for those sections.

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