

Editorial: Fresno Works teams up on California high-speed rail for good of our region

By The Bee Editorial Board

Fresno political and business leaders vowed six years ago to mount a *unified* effort to land the heavy maintenance facility that will anchor California's high-speed rail system.

Such a promise might appear quite modest but given our region's history of self-sabotaging politics, the pledge provided a much-needed foundation for a quest that could bring 1,500 permanent, well-paying jobs to the Valley.

Led by Fresno County Supervisor Henry R. Perea and Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin, the effort — dubbed Fresno Works — has not been sidetracked by turf wars, election politics or the often inane chatter of talk radio.

And the package assembled to convince the California High-Speed Rail Authority to construct the heavy maintenance facility along Fresno's southern edge is impressive.

A site of about 510 acres has been identified and it meets all of CHSR's criteria. Fresno County Council of Governments — a transportation-planning and policy organization that includes representatives from cities across the county — has authorized \$25 million in money from Measure C, the county's half-cent transportation sales tax, as an incentive to select Fresno over competing proposals from Madera, Merced, Kings and Kern counties.

Moreover, Fresno Works leaders have kept their ears to the rail, so to speak, and their eyes on the competition. Reacting to Kern County's renewed interest in securing the heavy maintenance facility, they asked Fresno COG to advance \$750,000 in Measure C funds to reimburse a local developer for buying options on the property needed for the site.

The request received an informal green light last week, thus potentially negating the fact that Kern County's proposed site is owned by a single entity. "We know we're going to have to acquire the property," Perea told The Bee's Tim Sheehan. "This just gets the ball rolling a little earlier. It's important to secure the options on the land."

Fresno has much to offer the rail authority. Our metro region is the hub of the San Joaquin Valley. Fresno State boasts the Lyles College of Engineering. State Center Community College District and our local high schools are putting together programs to train high-speed rail workers. Fresno has the Valley's only regional airport. And Fresno is home to the Valley's most comprehensive medical and emergency services.

To its credit, Fresno Works is looking beyond the immediate boost to the local economy that the heavy maintenance facility would deliver. Leaders envision Fresno becoming the national center for high-speed rail testing, development and innovation. To foster that, the group has identified land that would become an adjacent high-speed rail industrial park.

Jeff Morales, the rail authority's CEO, says that a decision on the site probably won't be made until early next year.

Whatever the outcome, Fresno Works has shown that Fresno leaders can pull together on projects important to the region.