

Fresno officials will travel to Spain to study its high-speed rail

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On Saturday, a group of Fresno politicians, businessmen, education, labor and economic development officials will leave on a nine-day trip to Spain, where they will look at various aspects of the Spanish high-speed rail system and how some of its best practices can be used for California's bullet train.

Exact details of the trip, however, are hard to come by. No roster of attendees has been provided. It is also unclear who is paying for the trip, other than that Assembly Member Henry T. Perea, who is leading the trip, is paying his way using campaign funds, as is Fresno City Council Member Esmeralda Soria. Its total cost is also unknown.

Henry T. Perea, D-Fresno, is leading a group of local officials to see Spain's high-speed rail system. Courtesy of Henry T. Perea

Lee Ann Eager, president and CEO of the Fresno County Economic Development Corp., said the trip is the brainchild of Perea, a Fresno Democrat. "It's not our show, but we're coordinating," Eager said. "Assemblyman Perea said he'd like to get a group from California together to look at what Spanish companies are doing with high-speed rail."

Perea, she added, wanted to know whether Eager – who will participate in the trip – would work with her connections with Renfe, the Spanish government's passenger rail operator, and other firms to develop an itinerary or agenda of visits and meetings for the California group. That itinerary, apparently, still hasn't been finalized.

At this point, the only confirmed attendees are Eager and four elected Democrats: Perea; his father, Fresno County Supervisor Henry R. Perea; and two Fresno City Council members, Soria and Council President Oliver Baines. Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin, a Republican and high-speed rail supporter, is not going.

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Lee Ann Eager, president and CEO of the Fresno County Economic Development Corp.

For close to two weeks, Assembly Member Perea did not return inquiries about the trip. On Wednesday, his office put out a news release with scant details, but did note that the trip will use no taxpayer money. In an interview, however, Baines said he paid for the plane flight and hotel accommodation using his council funds, which is taxpayer money. In addition, the Economic Development Corp. gets 9 percent of its funding from "city and county contributions," which is taxpayer money. Some of its members, which also provide money to the organization, are also publicly funded educational institutions, such as Fresno State.

Eager did not respond to subsequent requests to clarify aspects of the trip. Despite many requests, Assembly Member Perea could also not be reached to comment.

In an interview, Baines defended using taxpayer dollars for the trip.



Local officials, he said, regularly take taxpayer-funded educational or lobbying trips. He cited League of California Cities meetings and the annual “One Voice” lobbying trip to Washington D.C., which involves elected and government officials from around Fresno County. He said Swearingin also travels regularly to the nation’s capital to lobby on behalf of the city.

“It’s not uncommon for policymakers and legislators to use money in their accounts to lobby on behalf of the city,” he said. “The mayor does it. Council members do it. That’s what we do when we are lobbying on behalf of the city. It’s not malicious.”

The trips pay dividends, he said, in job creation and city investment. This trip, he said, will do the same.

Baines also said the trip isn’t a vacation. “These are pretty intense trips,” he said. “These are work trips. This is not a junket.”

Soria agreed.

“We don’t want to reinvent the wheel,” she said. “We want to learn from other municipalities and put Fresno in the best position to be competitive for the maintenance facility, and to make sure that the jobs that are created out of this big project benefit directly our community.” The maintenance facility would be a place where trains are repaired. A site at the southern end of Fresno has been identified for that facility. About 1,500 jobs would be created.

Baines said his goals for the trip are two-pronged — to look at development around the Spanish high-speed rail stations, and to learn about job-training efforts that helped Spaniards earn construction jobs. He said Eager invited him to go on the trip.

“We have a tremendous opportunity here with high-speed rail,” he said. “We should be leveraging this. We have a poor city.”

Part of that is finding a way to train Fresno residents, who can then hopefully earn construction jobs on the project. If Fresno’s work force isn’t trained and prepared, Baines said, the workers will still be needed. “They’ll find them from somewhere,” Baines said. “We want to keep those jobs at home as much as we can.”

He also wants to take a close look at the areas around the stations.

Fresno, aided by a grant from the California High-Speed Rail Authority, is undertaking a study for the area surrounding the planned bullet-train station at Mariposa and H streets to determine how the city can build on the station’s potential to spur economic growth in the downtown district.

In Madrid, Barcelona and other major Spanish cities, high-speed train stations are located in city centers. In addition to providing amenities and services for travelers, some larger stations are destinations of their own, housing a variety of retailers and restaurants. And while shopkeepers and restaurateurs in commercial districts surrounding the stations cannot precisely quantify how much business they get because of the high-speed trains, they credit the system with increasing pedestrian traffic and creating the potential for more business.

Eager said she also plans on meeting with representatives of a Spanish solar-power firm that has expressed interest in doing business in the Valley.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority said it is aware of the trip but is not participating in it. Tom Richards, the authority’s vice chairman, said he was invited in late August by the EDC to go, but added that time constraints made it unlikely that he would attend. The itinerary he saw included one day with representatives of Dragados S.A., a major Spanish construction firm.

Dragados S.A.’s American subsidiary, Dragados USA Inc., is the managing partner of the contracting consortium selected to build a 60-mile section of California’s high-speed rail route through the central San Joaquin Valley from

the south end of Fresno to the Tulare-Kern county line.

But Dragados is not the only Spanish firm with hopes to cash in on California's bullet-train aspirations. Officials from Renfe and Adif, which manages and maintains Spain's tracks and railroad infrastructure, have expressed interest in high-speed rail in California and the U.S.

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Fresno City Council President Oliver Baines

Two other Spanish contractors, Ferrovial Agroman and Acciona, joined to submit an unsuccessful bid to build the state's first rail construction segment, a 29-mile stretch between Fresno and Madera. Ferrovial Agroman dropped out of the bidding for the second stretch from Fresno to the Tulare-Kern county line.

Another potential player is Talgo, a Spanish train manufacturer that, along with companies from around the world, is expected to compete for a contract to build train sets for California's project. An initial order could be 15 to 20 trains, and a contract could potentially call for as many as 95 trains over the next decade. The state estimated last year that it will probably spend almost \$990 million to buy the trains needed for its "initial operating segment" from Merced to Burbank by 2022. Capital spending for trains is expected to balloon to about \$3.3 billion by the time the system is planned to be fully built out from downtown San Francisco to downtown Los Angeles and Anaheim.

Baines said that Dragados is playing a key role in the trip. He said he thinks the company may be setting up travel for the Fresno participants while they are in Spain. Baines said he has yet to pay for his meals and isn't sure how those or his in-country travel will be paid for.

The city, Fresno County and other entities are also key players in Fresno Works, a committee established to promote Fresno to the state rail agency as a site for the heavy maintenance facility. Such a facility would serve as a commissioning and overhaul site for the system's train sets and is considered something of an economic "golden goose" for the San Joaquin Valley, not only for the permanent jobs it would provide, but also for its potential to attract related industries needed to serve the train system. The EDC's Eager and Supervisor Perea are two of Fresno Works biggest cheerleaders.

In the news release about the trip, Supervisor Perea said he is looking forward "to touring the maintenance facilities and studying the design of the state-of-the-art train stations, understanding Fresno County is being given prime consideration for a high-tech maintenance facility."

Spain is often cited by state high-speed rail leaders as a system that most resembles what California is planning. The nation has more than 1,500 miles of high-speed tracks in operation, with Madrid as the hub of a system connecting the capital with cities across the country from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea.

As in California, the routes cross through cities, agricultural areas and mountain ranges. According to the International Union of Railways, Spain has another 812 miles of high-speed lines under construction and about 1,000 more miles on the drawing board.