

Fresno, Valley cities continue to chase high-speed rail maintenance hopes

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Five years ago, as the San Joaquin Valley was caught in the gaping maw of a recession, the California High-Speed Rail Authority sparked a frenzy of activity among the region's leaders with plans to build a major maintenance facility – and bring at least 1,500 coveted jobs – somewhere in the Valley.

As many as 13 different sites were proposed to the authority in 2010, as communities anticipated the prospect of an economic “golden goose” with the promise of good-paying, long-term jobs and hopes for attracting other industries in support of the statewide bullet-train system. The number of possible sites has since been winnowed to eight, and there's still a great deal of anticipation over the eventual site selection.

But the choice of a site, once expected to happen this year, now seems likely to drag into at least mid-2016 as the authority finalizes its route options, and consultants and engineers evaluate the remaining sites to see which ones will best meet the operational needs of the system.

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Lisa Marie Alley, California High-Speed Rail Authority spokeswoman

“From our perspective, all of the remaining proposals had their site footprints environmentally cleared, and we still consider them all to be among the ones we're looking at,” said Lisa Marie Alley, a spokeswoman for the rail authority. “What we're doing right now is developing what we call the design and selection criteria that will further advance the work that needs to be done. ... That will help us determine, as the alignments are selected, which sites are closest in accessibility to our lines and to freight lines for bringing materials in, to help us determine what makes sense.”

Alley said those selection criteria will be presented to the agency's board for approval in December or January; only then will the detailed operational evaluation of the sites begin in earnest. “We'll still have several months of work, and possibly do some more environmental analysis of the sites” that could coincide with environmental analysis and approval of a new route alternative and passenger station site in north Bakersfield, Alley said. “We'd like to be able to say that by the end of 2016, we will go to the board for the formal selection of a site” for the maintenance facility.

Worth the wait?

Of the eight sites remaining on the books, four have garnered the most attention: one at the southern edge of Fresno; one in Merced County, at the Castle Commerce Center that is the former home of Castle Air Force Base near Atwater and two in Kern County – one near the city of Shafter and the other in Wasco.

Three more sites are in Madera County, but the future of those is uncertain until the rail authority chooses from a slew of options for a junction between the Merced-Fresno stretch of the rail line and a branch westward from Chowchilla toward Gilroy, San Jose and the San Francisco Bay Area.

There's also one prospective location southeast of Hanford.

For any of the proposals, the eventual payoff is seen as worth the wait.

At least 1,500 jobs – and perhaps thousands more – are at stake in a region of California plagued by unemployment rates that are chronically higher than the state and national rates. A maintenance facility represents what Fresno County Supervisor Henry R. Perea has for years referred to as “an economic game changer” for whichever community is chosen by the state.

The station would be the primary depot for substantial work keeping the all-electric trains rolling, and would likely be the site where testing, outfitting, commissioning and repair of the train sets will happen as the state anticipates commencing passenger operations in 2022 between Merced and Burbank. The state estimates that the workforce will hold a range of jobs, including blue-collar, white-collar and technical. The Valley is in line for the station for the same reason that the initial construction of the rail line is happening here: The region is about the only place in the state where the trains can be tested at their maximum operating speeds of 220 mph.

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Fresno officials left this weekend for a nine-day study trip to Spain, where their itinerary includes a visit to a train maintenance depot run by Renfe, the Spanish government company that operates that nation’s passenger rail system.

Some sites are offering bigger plums as enticements to the state than others. Fresno County will pony up as much as \$25 million in Measure C transportation funds for development of the Fresno site if the state selects that location. Backers of the Shafter site promise free land to the rail authority. Free land is also on the table in Merced County for the Castle site, something that leaders there say makes them a key contender not to be ignored. “More importantly, Castle has the second-longest runway in California – making this location the only multimodal site proposed by any applicant,” Josh Pedrozo, Merced’s mayor pro tem, wrote in the Merced Sun-Star.

The prospects for the Shafter site – once seen by Fresno County as its major competitor – may be a little dimmer, as the rail authority works with the city of Bakersfield on a new route option entering the city from the north that would essentially bypass the Shafter maintenance location. That’s giving new hope to Wasco city manager J. Paul Paris for his community’s chances.

“My understanding is that Shafter is not out of the running, but the new alignment to Bakersfield would require a spur going to the land they were basically given by Paramount Farms,” Paris said. “That probably does not work to their benefit.”

“We don’t have free land, and we don’t have the kind of money that Fresno does,” he added. “But the state has said it wants to put it in an economically depressed area. ... We are probably the most economically depressed city in the Valley, and it would be an economic godsend for Wasco. We would welcome it with open arms.”

Related factors

The decision on where to build the heavy maintenance facility will not be a stand-alone choice, according to the rail authority.

The agency expects that the responsibility of building the depot will be awarded to the same company that is ultimately chosen to build the train sets themselves. But Alley said construction of the maintenance facility and manufacture of the train sets could also be packaged as part of a much broader contract for a “rail-delivery partner” that would be responsible for taking the statewide project from its current stage of construction contracts in the Valley

to full buildout and eventual operation.

Companies within the international rail industry are expected to present expressions of interest in a rail-delivery partnership by the end of this month.

Late last year, nine train manufacturers from around the world signaled desire to do business with California, including companies from France, Germany, Spain, South Korea, Japan, China, Italy and Canada. Once the state gets ready to formally seek bids – something Alley said could happen in late 2016 – an initial order could be for up to 15 to 20 trains. A contract could ultimately include up to 95 trains over the next decade and be worth more than \$3.3 billion.

Alley added that the rail authority will need to have settled on a site for the maintenance facility by that time so that train manufacturers will be able to consider that as they prepare their bids to build the train sets. “It will be the decision of the (authority) board as to the site selection,” she said, “and the manufacturers will have to work with that.”

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