

Pros and cons of high-speed rail discussed

Alex Tavlian, Fresno Bee, 10-28-11

The pros and cons of California's ambitious high-speed rail project were hotly debated Thursday evening in a town hall meeting at Fresno State's Satellite Student Union.

The meeting, hosted by The Smittcamp Family Honors College, started with a presentation by former Assembly Member Mike Villines, who called the project California's equivalent of the moon landing, a once-in-a-generation project.

During the question-and-answer period, Hanford resident Aaron Fukuda said that Villines' rhetoric in support of the rail project was empty without any numbers to prove the plan was worth supporting.

Hanford Assembly Member David Valadao's presentation was entitled "Pumping the Brakes on High-Speed Rail" and questioned the logic of building the rail line when only 3% of the project's funding has been identified.

Valadao said the California High-Speed Rail Authority has failed to provide information to city and county governments and local residents in Kings County – including those who might lose property because of the project.

Valadao's hometown of Hanford is the current battleground over the Fresno-Bakersfield rail route, causing the rail authority to extend the environmental impact review period so planners could study a new station and route that would bypass Hanford to the west.

Elizabeth Alexis of Californians Advocating Responsible Rail Design and Daniel Krause of Californians for High-Speed Rail discussed the effect of high-speed rail on communities and the California State University budget.

Alexis said the amount the state would need to borrow for the rail project would divert \$700 million annually to pay the interest on the debt, costing CSU students \$2,000 annually each.

But her primary focus was that the Central Valley should not take the lead on the high-speed rail project because if the statewide plan isn't completed, the rail line would be underused compared to other regions.

But Krause contended that the high-speed rail project would help reduce urban sprawl, a development issue that threatens Valley farmland.

Krause added that if the Fresno-Bakersfield route failed to materialize into a statewide train system, it could be folded into the Amtrak system.