

High-speed rail route to be revised

Officials will issue a new design next spring for the 114-mile segment from Fresno to Bakersfield, which encountered strong criticism.

Ralph Vartabedian, Los Angeles Times, 10-6-11

The proposed California bullet train will undergo major design changes, involving more than half of the route that traverses the Central Valley, the authority building the system said Wednesday.

The plan for building a 114-mile segment of the system between Fresno and Bakersfield was released in August, but encountered heavy criticism from citizens groups, local cities, major land owners and financial experts. The California High-Speed Rail Authority, responding to public feedback, said it would issue a new plan for that section next spring.

The segment is projected to cost \$6.1 billion to \$7.2 billion, up to double the original estimates. The escalation accompanied decisions to have long elevated bridges over cities and route options disrupting more businesses than first planned and traversing rich agricultural fields. The plan would have required 23 miles of elevated track structure and crossed 124 public roads, requiring big construction projects at each point.

The authority was sharply criticized by citizens groups, local governments and powerful farmers for allowing only 45 days of public comment on a document that runs 17,000 pages. The pullback of the plan reflects the influence of two new board members appointed by Gov. Jerry Brown. They have been asking fundamental questions about the entire design of the system, its costs and its funding.

The authority said the revisions will not affect the start of construction next year, and it is not backing off from plans for the Central Valley segment that runs from Fresno to Merced. That portion of up to 95 miles is expected to cost \$4.4 billion to \$6.9 billion.

Some of the most severe criticism has surrounded Hanford. The authority proposed laying track east of the historic railroad town and putting a station in the middle of a farm field. Now, the authority will consider a route west of Hanford.

The Central Valley segment was supposed to be the easiest and lowest-cost part of the system. Critics say the urban segments through Los Angeles County and the Bay Area will be even more problematic. Authority spokeswoman Rachel Wall said contractors would revise the Fresno-to-Bakersfield plan within their existing contract, suggesting that the change would not increase costs.