

Farming giant jumps into high-speed rail fray

Seth Nidever, Hanford Sentinel, 9-17-11

Kings County farming titan J.G. Boswell Co. has entered the high-speed rail debate, arguing that the amount of time the California High-Speed Rail Authority is allowing to review a recently released environmental impact report is “grossly inadequate.”

“The Authority claims transparency in its proceedings, but this claim rings hollow at this crucial juncture,” attorney Bob Dowd wrote in a 13-page letter drafted on behalf of Boswell asking for six months to review the EIR.

“The key point in the California Environmental Quality Act process is at hand, and the 60 days allotted to review and comment on 17,000 pages of material for the Fresno-to-Bakersfield segment stacks the deck against the commenting parties.”

The Sentinel counted 30,206 pages in the documents, including appendices, released Aug. 9 for a 45-day comment period on the proposed Fresno-to-Bakersfield route, which would cut through 28 miles of Kings County farmland, including Boswell property in and around Corcoran.

On Aug. 25, after receiving several requests from Kings County groups and others to extend the comment period to 90 days, the Authority extended the comment period from 45 days to 60 days.

“This is a sensitive legal process, and I’m not in a position to respond,” said Rachel Wall, a spokeswoman for the Authority. “[Boswell’s] request will likely be considered and responded to shortly.”

The letter requests that the Authority board hold a special meeting to consider the issue. The Authority originally had a Sept. 22 board meeting scheduled, but that meeting will not be held due to scheduling conflicts, said Wall. The board’s next meeting isn’t currently scheduled until Nov. 3, although Wall said the Authority will probably hold a meeting sometime in October. The EIR comment period is currently scheduled to end Oct. 13.

Dowd argued in the letter mailed late last week that 60 days isn’t long enough “to allow the public ‘adequate time’ for public review and comment, as required by CEQA guidelines.”

“They have 17,000 pages of documents,” Dowd said in a phone interview Wednesday. “Boswell is greatly concerned about the impacts on Corcoran and the impacts on its farming operation. They’re truly committed to letting [the company’s] voice be heard.”

The addition of the powerful agricultural operation’s voice to the mix might give added weight to other local groups like Citizens for California High Speed Rail Accountability that have asked for time extensions.

“In retrospect, we agree with [Dowd’s] letter,” said Aaron Fukuda, co-chairman of the citizens group. “Now that we’re into the document, it’s insurmountable. Boswell brings a large farming background, definitely the largest farming outfit in the Tulare Lake bottom. This isn’t something to take lightly.”

The Boswell Co. would be negatively impacted by all three alternative routes the Authority is proposing near Corcoran, two of which would pass through the city and another that would bypass it to the east, said Jim Wadsworth, company vice president.

“All three proposed routes impact Boswell Co. facilities, and we’re trying to review the EIR,” he said. “It’s very extensive. We feel strongly we didn’t have enough time. It’s the largest infrastructure project in California history, and they give you 60 days. That’s a travesty. That’s about the time they give you to build a strip mall.”

Corcoran city officials have submitted a letter to the Authority supporting Boswell’s request for a six-month review, said Kindon Meik, interim city manager.

Boswell’s request is being made at a time when the Authority is coming under increasing criticism for allegedly poor management and failing to secure adequate financing to complete the full Bay Area-to-Southern California route, estimated by the Authority to cost \$43 billion, though some outside estimates put it as high as \$67 billion.

The draft EIR estimates that the Merced-to-Bakersfield segment will cost anywhere from \$10 billion to \$13.9 billion, up from \$7.1 billion in earlier estimates. The Authority has about \$6.3 billion on hand in prior federal funds and state bond money. It plans to begin construction on the Central Valley section next year.

Last week, Congress made cuts to federal high-speed rail funding that could cause the project to run out of money to complete the whole system, according to the Los Angeles Times.

Several groups, including Kings County itself, are expected to file lawsuits against the Authority’s environmental review process, which they say is incomplete, inadequate and rushed.

“I hope the name J.G. Boswell Co. assists in getting the Authority to extend the [EIR review period] to six months,” Dowd said.