

Work begins on Calif. bullet train, locals angry

Juliet Williams, Associated Press, 10-22-13

FRESNO -- Trucks loaded with tomatoes, milk and almonds clog the two main highways that bisect California's farm heartland, carrying goods to millions along the Pacific Coast and beyond. This dusty stretch of land is the starting point for one of the nation's most expensive public infrastructure projects: a \$68 billion high-speed rail system that would span the state, linking the people of America's salad bowl to more jobs, opportunity and buyers.

Five years ago, California voters overwhelmingly approved the idea of bringing a bullet train to the nation's most populous state. It would be America's first high-speed rail system, sold to the public as a way to improve access to good-paying jobs, cut pollution from smog-filled roadways and reduce time wasted sitting in traffic while providing an alternative to high fuel prices.

Now, engineering work has finally begun on the first 30-mile segment of track here in Fresno, a city of a half-million people with high unemployment and a withering downtown core littered with abandoned factories and shuttered stores.

Rail is meant to help this place, with construction jobs now and improved access to economic opportunity once the job is complete. But the region that could benefit most from the project is also where opposition to it has grown most fierce.

"I just wish it would go away, this high-speed rail. I just wish it would go away," says Gary Lanfranco, whose restaurant in downtown Fresno is slated to be demolished to make way for rerouted traffic.

Such sentiments can be heard throughout the Central Valley, where roads are dotted with signs such as: "HERE COMES HIGH SPEED RAIL There goes the farm." Growers complain of misplaced priorities, and residents wonder if their tax money is being squandered.

Aaron Fukuda, a civil engineer whose house in the dairy town of Hanford lies directly in one of the possible train routes, says: "People are worn out, tired, frustrated."

Voters in 2008 approved \$10 billion in bonds to start construction on an 800-mile rail line to ferry passengers between San Francisco and Los Angeles in 2 hours and 40 minutes, compared with 6 hours by car now during good traffic. Since then, the housing market collapsed, multibillion-dollar budget deficits followed, and the price tag has fluctuated wildly — from \$45 billion in 2008 to more than \$100 billion in 2011 and, now, \$68 billion.

Political and financial compromises led officials to scale back plans that now mean trains will be forced to slow down and share tracks in major cities, leading critics to question whether it will truly be the 220-mph "high-speed rail" voters were promised.

The high-speed rail business plan says trains will run between the greater Los Angeles area and the San Francisco Bay Area by 2029. But construction has been postponed repeatedly, and a court victory this summer by opponents threatens further delays; a Sacramento County Superior Court judge said the state rail authority's plan goes against the promise made to voters to identify all the funding for the first segment before starting construction.

Even the former chairman of the California High-Speed Rail Authority, Quentin Kopp, has turned against the

current project, saying in court papers that it "is no longer a genuine high speed rail system."

In the Central Valley, there is intense distrust of the authority, which has started buying up property, land and businesses, some of which have been in families for generations.

At the dimly lit Cosmopolitan Cafe, office workers line up alongside farmers and paramedics to order sandwiches as waitresses expeditiously call out order numbers. Four decades' worth of memorabilia and yellowing newspaper restaurant reviews line the faux-wood walls in the space Lanfranco has owned for most of his life.

Lanfranco says the sum he was offered to buy the property does not come close to replacing the space he owns, debt-free. The adjacent parking lot — a rare commodity — is packed with pickup trucks and cars each day at lunchtime. Lanfranco declined to say how much he was offered, and the offers are not public record.

"It's not like it's just a restaurant that I've owned for a couple of years and now I can just go replace it. It's something that I've put the last 45 years of my life into," the 66-year-old says.

His is just one of hundreds of properties the state needs to buy for the rail project or seize through eminent domain if they cannot reach a deal. Many owners are resentful after years of what they say have been confusing messages and misleading information. Raisin farmer Ray Moles may lose a fraction of his farmland, but he says that is not why he opposes the train.

"I think water is more important than rail. Bring some water to the valley, put some people to work, and you'll have candidates to ride on the rail," Moles says after finishing lunch at the Cosmopolitan. "They're putting the cart before the horse. They want to put the rail in this summer, but they don't want to do the water for 20 years."

Rail officials acknowledge that the agency hasn't always communicated with those most affected by the project, and part of their work in the Central Valley is strictly public relations.

"Frankly, it set us back, because we, in effect, created questions and even opposition by just failing to give people answers," says Jeff Morales, the authority's chief executive officer since 2012.

For supporters, high-speed rail is the solution to California's future transportation needs, when the state's already jammed, rutted highways and busy airports won't be enough for a population expected to hit 46 million by 2035.

It will create hundreds of good-paying jobs for several years as officials tear down buildings, draw engineering plans, survey wildlife and, eventually, lay track. It will also help move the Central Valley beyond the dominant low-wage agriculture sector, Morales says.

"By connecting Fresno, Bakersfield and the other cities of the Central Valley to Los Angeles and San Francisco ... it just creates more opportunities for people," he says. "It creates a whole different sort of economy that'll just raise the Central Valley."

Gov. Jerry Brown calls rail "cheaper than the alternative, and it's a hell of a lot better." The project also offers the 75-year-old Democrat a chance at a legacy. What is less certain is what the legacy will be, and whether high-speed rail will ever be what was once promised. Critics say the ridership projections are inflated and rely on low ticket prices that would require government subsidies, although the federal Government Accountability Office has called them reasonable.

The Obama administration promised \$3.2 billion for the first phase as part of the federal stimulus package, but

that is just a fraction of the money needed to complete the system, leaving many of the valley's 6.5 million residents to suspect California taxpayers will be on the hook for the rest. The state's independent analyst calls current funding plans "highly speculative."

Republicans in Congress have furiously fought to block any more federal funding as GOP governors in Ohio, Wisconsin and Florida have backed out of plans for high-speed rail in those states.

Fukuda is among the residents who are suing to try to block California's rail line. He and his wife had planned to build their dream house on their Hanford property. At first he planned to build sound barriers, but then he says he lost faith in the planners.

"I don't think it's a viable, well thought-out or ... financially feasible project for the state of California," he says.

It is rare to find someone in Hanford, a town of 55,000 people south of Fresno, who is not opposed to the project. Many landowners have been in financial limbo for years as the authority weighs different paths for the train, leaving farmers wary of planting crops or investing in new equipment in case their land ends up being gobbled up.

Among them is Kole Upton, a farmer in Chowchilla whose family has put on hold plans to replace almond trees. The rail authority is busily signing contracts with engineering firms and contractors in hopes of getting shovels in the ground in the next few months.

"When they come in with these routes they put a cloud on your land," says Upton, who works with his brother and son on the 1,400-acre family farm but has devoted much of his time to fighting high-speed rail.

Officials, Fukuda says, "don't understand the emotional toll this has taken on the community."