

# California high-speed-rail groundbreaking pushed back another few months

**Mike Rosenberg, Bay Area News Group, 9-18-13**

All year, the state billed the summer of 2013 as the season when California's biggest-ever public works project - a \$69 billion high-speed rail line -- would finally leave the station with a groundbreaking that has been decades in the making.

But with autumn arriving this weekend and no bulldozers in sight, rail officials for the first time have acknowledged it will be another "few months" before construction, which has already been delayed a year, begins.

The state still needs to buy more land and equipment, finish designs and hire workers, while a pair of lawsuits set to be decided in the coming months could even force more delays.

A date still hasn't been set for the formal ceremony marking the first shovel in the ground -- the moment when the project should finally seem more real for many dubious Californians, as billions of tax dollars begin flowing and steel starts going up.

Bullet train officials maintain they're meeting their schedule. They now say the start of construction they had promised was actually "shorthand" for initial prep work such as testing soil, surveying land and finishing designs. Those jobs began a month ago without fanfare.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority says it has the needed permits and bought enough land to start building on part of the initial 29-mile section in the Central Valley, from Madera to Fresno. But the contractor working on the first \$1 billion package wants to wait until it can proceed full-speed ahead on several miles of the route all at once.

"We could be out there this week if we wanted to just knock down one building," said rail authority CEO Jeff Morales. But "that doesn't make economic sense."

Still, critics say Californians won't see hammer-wielding workers in the field unless the state wins two civil cases -- one to be heard next week, the other in November.

"The future of this plan is in doubt," said former longtime project Chairman Quentin Kopp, a former state legislator and judge who now opposes the bullet train. "I don't know how (the state) could even mention starting construction with pending litigation. It's irresponsible."

Morales says the state is still on pace to meet a September 2017 deadline to spend \$3 billion in federal grants, the first pot of money that would be used. And the delays have not driven up the bullet train's latest price tag or the schedule for starting service in 2022 between the Central Valley and Southern California, with the full route between San Francisco and Los Angeles opening by 2029.

The Obama administration initially tied the funds to starting construction by September 2012, but later relaxed its guidelines. After the first target was missed, construction was scheduled to begin by the end of 2012, then early 2013, then July, then late summer.

"I don't think they know what the real construction start date is," said Kings County resident Aaron Fukuda, one

of the plaintiffs in a 2011 suit against the rail authority. "This is being made up from day to day."

Construction has been a long time coming, since Gov. Jerry Brown, in his first go-round as governor, signed a bill that kicked off planning 30 years ago. California voters approved a \$10 billion high-speed-rail bond five years ago, and President Barack Obama awarded the project a \$2.3 billion stimulus grant to create jobs four years ago.

But Morales said the "starting gun" really went off 14 months ago, when the Legislature and Brown approved the \$6 billion bill authorizing construction on the first 130 miles of tracks between Merced and Bakersfield.

Since then, officials have more than tripled the rail authority staff to 80 employees, signed the first construction contract with developer consortium Tutor Perini, obtained various government approvals, and reached key deals with private companies such as Union Pacific and PG&E. The state has also reached agreements to buy 50 of the 375 rural properties it needs along the first route.

"We've been doing a lot of work," Morales said. Referring to the future groundbreaking event, he said: "We have not tried to artificially accelerate (construction) in order to get a picture or anything like that."

But they've also been unable to swat away a 2011 lawsuit brought by Kings County and Bay Area opponents who want to invalidate the bond funds, arguing that construction costs have doubled and service delayed a decade since voters approved the train line in 2008.

A Sacramento judge last month ruled that the rail authority had violated two aspects of the ballot measure but set a November court date for both sides to argue over whether any punishment should be doled out. The plaintiffs formally filed a motion in court this week seeking to block construction, but the judge has repeatedly denied such attempts in various civil cases against the bullet train over the past half-decade.

The rail authority also faces a Sept. 27 hearing for a "validation" lawsuit the state filed in March, essentially against the whole world -- an attempt to take care of all other potential cases challenging the bond measure at once. The Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association and a handful of other opponents responded and are now asking the judge to shut down the rail line.