

Demolition starts on old Del Monte building, clearing way for high-speed rail

Tim Sheehan, Fresno Bee, 9-18-14

The hardened steel teeth of a large excavating machine took the first bites out of the derelict Del Monte building in downtown Fresno on Wednesday, marking the start of several weeks of work to demolish the building to make way for California's high-speed rail project.

At more than 100,000 square feet of floor space, the 68-year-old building on G Street between Tulare and Kern streets is the largest structure so far to be torn down for the controversial bullet train network, said Diana Gomez, Central Valley regional director for the California High-Speed Rail Authority. The former packinghouse is just south of a proposed passenger station for the train system.

"Eventually what we'll have here is the tracks; this is, in a sense, where the train leaves the station, because the station is right across the street," Gomez said. Leading into and out of the station, there will be four sets of tracks -- two northbound and two southbound. One set of tracks in each direction will be for trains running nonstop through Fresno, the other tracks will be for trains stopping to pick up and drop off passengers.

Gomez said the building has been vacant for more than 10 years.

Steel beams on the metal-skinned Kern Street end of the building groaned in loud protest when excavator operator Martin Mendoza first tore into the structure and then gingerly plucked it apart. Crews hope to complete the removal of the metal portion of the building by the end of this week, said Brian Herrick, a representative of demolition subcontractor J. Kroeker Inc.

The sturdier concrete midsection of the building will likely take another four to six weeks to take down.

Workers for Katch Environmental, a firm that removes hazardous materials, spent more than two months inside the building taking out asbestos and other dangerous substances to make it safe for demolition. Once the steel portion of the structure is gone, they will head back into the concrete section of the building to finish up asbestos removal from the ceiling and roof above the third floor, said Katch Environmental owner Paul Katchadourian.

A fire that gutted the Tulare Street end of the building complicated efforts for Katchadourian's workers, as they had to clean up debris from the fire before the demolition work could occur.

The Fresno station location marks the southern end of the rail system's Merced-Fresno section where construction is supposed to begin this fall. Crews have demolished a handful of buildings to clear the path for the rail route's right of way and structures like road overpasses. It's also the northern end of the second construction segment that stretches from Fresno to the Tulare-Kern county line.

The Valley sections, which are expected to cost \$6 billion to build, will form the backbone of what is ultimately planned as a \$68 billion, 520-mile line connecting Los Angeles and San Francisco with electric trains capable of traveling at up to 220 mph. The project continues to face considerable opposition, including a plethora of legal challenges.