

High-speed rail: The next step

Luke Money, Santa Clarita Valley Signal, 12-25-15

After a year that saw Santa Clarita city officials rally local citizens and regional support to demand the California High-Speed Rail Authority run the bullet train completely underground all the way from Palmdale to Burbank, what's next for the controversial project?

In short? Lots of homework.

A number of different studies are either underway or planned to examine different aspects of the high-speed rail system, which voters approved in 2008 to connect Los Angeles Union Station and Anaheim to San Francisco, with links at other large state population centers.

Studies specific to the Palmdale-to-Burbank project section — which in some cases could involve routing the train through the Santa Clarita Valley — include a tunnel review, a seismic review, a groundwater study and an equine review to study the train's possible effects on horses, according to Authority spokeswoman Adeline Yee.

Each of those studies is being done by an outside agency, Yee said.

“In Southern California, the Authority continues to make progress in all the project sections, including the Palmdale-to-Burbank project section, where a number of technical studies are underway,” she wrote in an email. “We will of course update the public as these environmental studies continue in the new year.”

The Authority also recently received approval from the U.S. Forest Service for geotechnical/geophysical work in the Angeles National Forest to examine the feasibility of building a train tunnel through the forest.

Building such a tunnel would be necessary for some train routes under consideration, particularly in the so-called “East Corridor” in the Palmdale-to-Burbank section of the high-speed rail project.

Routes in that corridor entail running the train from the Antelope Valley to the San Fernando Valley on a relatively straight shot through the Angeles National Forest and the San Gabriel Mountains.

Another option is the “SR 14 Corridor,” which would have the train largely follow the route of Highway 14 through the Santa Clarita Valley.

Some residents of the northern San Fernando Valley, however, have objected to the East Corridor, saying they don't want the train running through the area.

Looking to present a unified regional front, Santa Clarita officials met with representatives from Acton, Agua Dulce and the city of San Fernando to create the North L.A. County Communities

Protection Coalition — with the goal of saying, with a unified voice, that the High-Speed Rail Authority needs to put the train underground wherever it runs.

The city also organized an “emergency” meeting attended by more than 1,300 people in April to emphasize the same point.

“We are speaking with one voice,” City Councilwoman Marsha McLean said at the time.

What route the train will actually end up taking remains to be seen, as the High-Speed Rail Authority is still doing environmental review in the project section, Yee said.

The studies that are underway will contribute to that work, Yee said.

“In the long term, we are looking to produce a draft environmental document by late 2016, with a final environmental document following by the end of 2017,” Yee said.

While the Authority looks at how best to make the high-speed rail project work, other officials, including some connected to the Santa Clarita Valley, are looking at ways to derail the project.

Board of Equalization member and former SCV legislator George Runner, along with state Sen. Bob Huff, R-San Dimas, submitted language for a ballot initiative in November that would allow voters to redirect billions of dollars in bond money from the rail project to water storage efforts.

Other legislators unsuccessfully pushed a bill that would have allowed the state to re-vote on the controversial project.

State Sen. Sharon Runner, R-Lancaster, also introduced a bill that would have taken cap-and-trade dollars earmarked for the bullet train and instead put them toward existing transportation needs.

That bill was later killed in committee.

Despite challenges to the project, this year saw some tangible progress.

Officials held a groundbreaking ceremony for the project in Fresno, and work is underway.

“We now have more than 100 miles of construction-related activities underway with over \$2 billion under contract in the Central Valley,” Yee said.