

Northeast Valley residents still ballistic over bullet train routes

Dana Bartholomew, The Press Telegram News, 12-3-15

SHADOW HILLS--First came the “yellow banana,” a vague proposal to run a bullet train through miles of mountains between Palmdale and Burbank. Then came the plans to send it whizzing through San Fernando Valley horse country.

A year after the California High-Speed Rail Authority announced three alternative high-speed rail routes through the northeast Valley, residents say they’ve been “held hostage by lack of progress.”

A group formed to fight the so-called East Corridor routes from Palmdale to Burbank met late Wednesday to protest an “anniversary of failure.” Others weighed in against an initial proposal to run the 220-mph train through dense northeast Valley neighborhoods.

“This battle, it’s been a tough year,” said Dave DePinto, president of the Shadow Hills Homeowners Association, during a community meeting hosted by the S.A.F.E. Coalition, which stands for Save Angeles Forest for Everyone. “It’s like being up against a \$50-billion corporation, a \$100-billion corporation.

“We’re all trying to save our quality of life.”

The now \$68 billion bullet train from San Francisco to Los Angeles approved by voters seven years ago has been challenged by lawsuits, cost and community opposition.

A segment from Palmdale to Burbank would either head down Highway 14 and cut through Newhall Pass, passing above ground from Sylmar to Bob Hope Airport. Or it would run 20 miles through the San Gabriel Mountains — passing beneath either Pacoima, Shadow Hills or Sunland — in one of three East Corridor routes into Burbank airport station.

Proponents of the bullet train say it could connect California economies, spur economic development, create jobs and contribute to a cleaner environment.

Opponents in Southern California say it could destroy a swath of homes and businesses from Acton to Santa Clarita to San Fernando, while robbing the latter city of a police station, \$1.3 million in tax revenue and 850 jobs.

Others say a mountain tunnel alternative could destroy a vast watershed, harm wildlife and endangered species. They also say one above-ground section near Shadow Hills could spook horses, impact a \$1.1 billion equestrian recreation industry and ding property values.

In June, the state High-Speed Rail Authority board heard mostly protests from hundreds of residents and officials from across the region concerned about the impact of the train.

While the Palmdale-to-Burbank segment is now the subject of an environmental review, Valley critics contend the rail agency has since then failed to complete technical studies it said could nix certain routes, including a soaring viaduct over Big Tujunga Wash.

They took the agency to task this week for failing to heed legislative requests to eliminate surface routes that could either split the equestrian community near Shadow Hills, or divide low-income communities from Sylmar to Sun Valley with a 20-foot wall.

They said the High-Speed Rail Authority since June has failed to communicate with Valley residents, name a Southern California board member to represent local communities or recruit independent, third-party oversight for its environmental studies.

The meeting on the anniversary of the Dec. 2 East Corridor alternative route announcement drew roughly 75 people to a Shadow Hills community room festooned with banners that said “No High Speed Rail: www.dontrailroad.us.”

“It’s about transparency, at all levels,” said Fritz Bronner, a board member of the Foothill Trails Neighborhood Council. “High-Speed Rail and Gov. Brown have ignored, and continue to ignore, our wishes.”

“I’m not happy about the project,” Assemblywoman Patty Lopez, D-San Fernando, told the group. “I’m elected to represent you, and this project is not right. It’s not ethical. It’s not moral. And it’s a waste of money.”

Agency officials vigorously disputed the claims, saying Thursday that community outreach has been active, its preliminary environmental studies on track, its independent oversight in place.

A Palmdale to Burbank Project Section Update posted two hours before the protest meeting outlined progress in balancing building a railway and protecting the environment and communities.

It said tunnel and equine reviews would be overseen by Mineta Transportation Institute at San Jose State University, a groundwater study review overseen by Cal State Fullerton and a seismic study review by the University of California, San Diego.

While critics said the San Jose State institute had ties to the rail authority — an emeritus executive director once served on the rail board — authority officials maintain there’s no conflict of interest.

“The MTI has been around since 1991, and has ties with many transportation agencies, including ours,” said Lisa Marie Alley, lead spokeswoman for the California High-Speed Rail Authority. “We do not believe there is a conflict of interest.”

The update also announced that the U.S. Forest Service had issued a special use permit for a geotechnical study for a potential tunnel through the Angeles National Forest.

A draft environmental study is expected by winter 2016, with the final document by the end of the following year.

“What we’re doing is hard,” Alley said. “It involved a number of different things. We are working hard to analyze a myriad of factors, as we continue to advance this environmental review of these corridors.

“At the end of the day, nothing we do would be suitable for these opponents,” she added, “because nothing we do makes them happy.”