

High-speed rail taking shape even as opponents seek to kill it

Kurtis Alexander, San Francisco Chronicle, 2-12-17

FRESNO — For many Californians, the plan to run high-speed trains between San Francisco and Los Angeles remains in the realm of fantasy. The project is short on cash, behind schedule and in the crosshairs of Republicans in Congress who've asked the Trump administration to hold back federal support for a key piece of the rail line.

But don't express doubts around people like Erik Lundgren. The Madera County contractor, who was laying utility lines on a recent weekday near the zoo in central Fresno, is among more than 1,000 workers whose long hours on a backhoe or cement truck are making the \$64 billion vision an unmistakable reality.

Crews are building bridges over rivers and clearing hundreds of homes and businesses. They're relocating a 2-mile stretch of Highway 99, while effectively turning the Fresno area into a sprawling construction site that's expected, one day, to churn out 220-mph trains zipping from the Central Valley to the Bay Area in less than an hour.

America's biggest infrastructure project is both in limbo and full-speed ahead.

"By the time we get off work, we don't have time to think about the bigger problems," said Lundgren, 38, before exchanging his hard hat for a burger that his boss picked up. "We just go to bed and get back up and do it again."

Far from the wrangling in Sacramento and Washington, work on the first 119-mile segment, from Madera to just outside Bakersfield, has been under way for almost two years.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority, the state agency in charge of the project, has bought up more than 1,000 parcels of land to accommodate the train line, from farms and produce distributors to a screen-printing shop and a Greyhound bus station. And the agency has inked big contracts with private construction companies to begin building.

All around Fresno, road closures and machinery noise have become the new norm. Perhaps most irritating for locals was the demolition of several popular businesses, including a Starbucks on the north end of the city that left commuters without their morning coffee — at least until another Starbucks popped up 50 feet away.

Rail officials say more than 90 percent of the shuttered merchants have relocated locally, or soon will.

The Rail Authority's long-term plan is for the line to run 500 miles, heading from San Francisco to San Jose before turning inland and then south to Los Angeles — a trip expected to take two hours and 40 minutes and cost appreciably less than flying. Officials say limited service from San Francisco to Bakersfield will launch in 2025.

But if the agenda is hardening, so are the skeptics. Problems with land acquisitions, numerous lawsuits and planning snafus have set the project back at least three years and doubled cost estimates from when California voters approved initial funding in 2008. Even with the progress in Fresno, some say the time has come to scrap the whole deal.

Shortly after President Trump took office, California's 14 Republican members of Congress, including House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield, sent a letter to the Department of Transportation, urging it to halt federal grant money for electrification of Caltrain's Bay Area corridor, which will be used by high-speed trains, until the project is audited.

Money from Washington is crucial for high-speed rail, which might not survive with state and private financing alone.

Trump's position on the subject remains unclear. He recently called left-leaning California "out of control" and threatened to withhold unspecified funds, but he told a group of airline executives Thursday that he was surprised by the lack of fast trains in the country.

Should funding dry up, the ballot measure that kicked off the rail project requires that whatever was built — the bridges, the tunnels, the tracks — be made available for other services, ostensibly Amtrak.

"If it comes to that, I failed, and California lost a huge opportunity," said Tom Richards, vice chair of the Rail Authority's governing board and a Fresno resident. "We think that in the end we'll succeed."

With about \$20 billion either in hand or all but certain to come, construction is full throttle at nine major sites.

Just south of downtown Fresno, the largest undertaking so far — a half-mile-long viaduct that will lift trains from the city into distant farmland — is taking shape in an area of old factories and warehouses. Already, the new structure is a monolith helping define the Fresno skyline.

"It's very satisfying to see," said the Rail Authority's Central Valley director, Diana Gomez, as she led a tour of the loud, muddy construction site. "Everyone can see this piece from Highway 99."

The columns of the superstructure stand nearly 80 feet tall, while the bridge deck is emerging as a sleek, aerial concourse. The span angles only slightly to accommodate the wide turns that can be expected with long and speedy trains. Each day, the giant viaduct grows as cranes hoist steel and concrete. All materials are American-made, officials say.

Two similar spans are under construction nearby. About 12 miles to the north, a nearly mile-long viaduct is rising over the San Joaquin River, while about 25 miles to the north, in Madera County, a bridge is materializing across the Fresno River.

One of the most significant activities, moving six lanes of Highway 99 about 100 feet to the west for 2 miles, will allow trains to squeeze through a dense part of central Fresno.

Now, however, the squeeze is on those living and working nearby. The area is marked by closed freeway exits and torn-up frontage roads.

"It's bad, real bad," said Gary Singh, who works at Fresno Gas & Liquor off the highway. "Cars can't get in, and they can't get out. We've lost business."

Diana Gomez the regional director of the California high-speed rail authority is seen during a visit to the San Joaquin River viaduct in Fresno, Ca. on Wednesday Feb. 1, 2017.

Rail officials say they've done their best to accommodate people, and note that there will be benefits, such as newly paved roads and the elimination of several existing crossings for freight trains, which will share overpasses with high-speed rail.

Dan Richard, chair of the Rail Authority's governing board, said it won't be long before the smattering of construction sites becomes a showpiece for the future of American transit. He hopes excitement will only build from there.

"There's really no place yet you can stand and see for miles and miles and say, 'Yeah, it's coming together,'" he said, looking up at the emerging bridge over the San Joaquin River. "But once these few projects get done, connecting them comes fast."