

Work begins on Calif. bullet train, locals angry (Update)

October 20 2013, by Juliet Williams



In this photo taken Tuesday, July 16, 2013, an Amtrak conductor checks the time as the passenger train takes on passengers in Hanford, Calif. The state's plan to build the first high-speed rail system in the nation is intended to alleviate gridlock, connect the Central Valley to better jobs, and ease pollution, but many residents oppose the \$68 billion project.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

Trucks loaded with tomatoes, milk and almonds clog the two main highways that bisect California's farm heartland, carrying goods to millions along the Pacific Coast and beyond. This dusty stretch of land is the starting point for one of the most expensive U.S. public

infrastructure projects: a \$68 billion high-speed rail system that would span the state, linking the people of America's salad bowl to more jobs, opportunity and buyers.

Five years ago, California voters overwhelmingly approved the idea of bringing a bullet train to the most populous U.S. state. It would be America's first high-speed rail system, sold to the public as a way to improve access to good-paying jobs, cut pollution from smog-filled roadways and reduce time wasted sitting in traffic while providing an alternative to high fuel prices.

Now, engineering work has finally begun on the first 30-mile (48-kilometer) segment of track here in Fresno, a city of a half-million people with soaring unemployment and a withering downtown core littered with abandoned factories and shuttered stores.

Rail is meant to help Fresno, with construction jobs now and improved access to economic opportunity once the project is finished. But the region that could benefit most from the project is also where opposition to it has grown most fierce.

"I just wish it would go away, this high-speed rail. I just wish it would go away," says Gary Lanfranco, whose restaurant in downtown Fresno is slated to be demolished to make way for rerouted traffic.

Such sentiments can be heard throughout the Central Valley, where roads are dotted with signs such as: "HERE COMES HIGH SPEED RAIL There goes the farm." Growers complain of misplaced priorities, and residents wonder if their tax money is being squandered.

Aaron Fukuda, a civil engineer whose house in the dairy town of Hanford lies directly in one of the possible train routes, says: "People are worn out, tired, frustrated."

Voters in 2008 approved \$10 billion in bonds to start construction on an 800-mile (1,300-kilometer) rail line to ferry passengers between San Francisco and Los Angeles in 2 hours and 40 minutes, compared with 6 hours by car now during good traffic. Since then, the housing market collapsed, multibillion-dollar budget deficits followed, and the price tag has fluctuated wildly—from \$45 billion in 2008 to more than \$100 billion in 2011 and, now, \$68 billion.

Political and financial compromises led officials to scale back plans that now mean trains will be forced to slow down and share tracks in major cities, leading critics to question whether it will truly be the 220-mph (355-kph) "high-speed rail" voters were promised.

The high-speed rail business plan says trains will run between the greater Los Angeles area and the San Francisco Bay Area by 2029. But construction has been postponed repeatedly, and a court victory this summer by opponents threatens further delays; a Sacramento County Superior Court judge said the state rail authority's plan goes against the promise made to voters to identify all the funding for the first segment before starting construction.

Even the former chairman of the California High-Speed Rail Authority, Quentin Kopp, has turned against the current project, saying in court papers that it "is no longer a genuine high speed rail system."



In this photo taken Thursday, Oct. 10, 2013, a freight train travels south alongside Highway 99 near Livingston, Calif. Construction of the nation's first high-speed rail system is slated to begin in Fresno promising to create construction jobs and link the Central Valley to the rest of California. Many Californians have soured on the \$68 billion plan in the five years since voters approved \$10 billion in bonds for it.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

In the Central Valley, there is intense distrust of the authority, which has started buying up property, land and businesses, some of which have been in families for generations.

At the dimly lit Cosmopolitan Cafe, office workers line up alongside farmers and paramedics to order sandwiches as waitresses expeditiously

call out order numbers. Four decades' worth of memorabilia and yellowing newspaper restaurant reviews line the faux-wood walls in the space that Lanfranco has owned for most of his life.

Lanfranco says the sum he was offered to buy the property does not come close to replacing the space he owns, debt-free. The adjacent parking lot—a rare commodity—is packed with pickup trucks and cars each day at lunchtime. Lanfranco declined to say how much he was offered, and the offers are not public record.

"It's not like it's just a restaurant that I've owned for a couple of years and now I can just go replace it. It's something that I've put the last 45 years of my life into," the 66-year-old says.



In this photo taken Wednesday, July 17, 2013, an abandoned building sits on the route for California's planned high-speed rail line in Fresno, Calif. Work is set to start on the first 30 mile segment of track in this city of 500,000 people with

soaring unemployment and a withering downtown core. The rail line was sold to voters five years ago as a way to create jobs, cut pollution and ease gridlock, but many residents have since soured on the \$68 billion plan. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

His is just one of hundreds of properties the state needs to buy for the rail project or seize through eminent domain if they cannot reach a deal. Many owners are resentful after years of what they say have been confusing messages and misleading information.

Rail officials acknowledge that the agency hasn't always communicated with those most affected by the project, and part of their work in the Central Valley is strictly public relations.

"Frankly, it set us back, because we, in effect, created questions and even opposition by just failing to give people answers," says Jeff Morales, the authority's chief executive officer since 2012.

For supporters, high-speed rail is the solution to California's future transportation needs, when the state's already jammed, rutted highways and busy airports won't be enough for a population expected to hit 46 million by 2035.

It will create hundreds of good-paying jobs for several years as officials tear down buildings, draw engineering plans, survey wildlife and, eventually, lay track. It will also help move the Central Valley beyond the dominant low-wage agriculture sector, Morales says.



In this photo taken Monday, July 15, 2013, a freight train passes the Amtrak station in Fresno, Calif. Construction of the nation's first high-speed rail system is slated to begin in this city of 500,000 people, promising to create construction jobs and link the Central Valley to the rest of California. But the place it is intended to help the most is also where opposition to the \$68 billion plan has also become most fierce. Many Californians have soured on the project in the five years since voters approved \$10 billion in bonds for it.(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

"By connecting Fresno, Bakersfield and the other cities of the Central Valley to Los Angeles and San Francisco ... it just creates more opportunities for people," he says. "It creates a whole different sort of economy that'll just raise the Central Valley."

Gov. Jerry Brown calls rail "cheaper than the alternative, and it's a hell of a lot better." The project also offers the 75-year-old Democrat a chance at a legacy. What is less certain is what the legacy will be, and whether high-speed rail will ever be what was once promised. Critics say the ridership projections are inflated and rely on low ticket prices that would require government subsidies, although the federal Government Accountability Office has called them reasonable.

The Obama administration promised \$3.2 billion for the first phase as part of the federal stimulus package, but that is just a fraction of the money needed to complete the system, leaving many of the valley's 6.5 million residents to suspect California taxpayers will be on the hook for the rest. The state's independent analyst calls current funding plans "highly speculative."

Republicans in Congress have furiously fought to block any more federal funding as Republican governors in Ohio, Wisconsin and Florida have backed out of plans for high-speed rail in those states.

Fukuda is among the residents who are suing to try to block California's rail line. He and his wife had planned to build their dream house on their Hanford property. At first he planned to build sound barriers, but then he says he lost faith in the planners.



In this photo taken Tuesday, July 16, 2013, high-speed rail opponent Aaron Fukuda poses in front of his Hanford, Calif., home that lies directly in one of the

planned train routes. Fukuda is one of many land owners in the Central Valley who have sued to try to stop the \$68 billion project. The state is buying up hundreds of properties to start construction of the first 30 mile segment of the rail line. Voters approved plans to build the bullet train five years ago, but public opinion about the project has since soured, and many now oppose it. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

"I don't think it's a viable, well thought-out or ... financially feasible project for the state of California," he says.

It is rare to find someone in Hanford, a town of 55,000 people south of Fresno, who is not opposed to the project. Many landowners have been in financial limbo for years as the authority weighs different paths for the train, leaving farmers wary of planting crops or investing in new equipment in case their land ends up being gobbled up.

Officials, Fukuda says, "don't understand the emotional toll this has taken on the community."

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