

High-speed rail board OKs hybrid Valley route

By Ameera Butt, staff writer

In the Merced Sun-Star and Fresno Bee, Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2011

The California High-Speed Authority approved a hybrid route for the Merced-to-Fresno route during its board meeting Tuesday in Merced.

But the decision came amid a chorus of voices -- pro and con, urban and rural -- from about 100 people who crowded the City Hall council chambers and spilled over into the lobby and elsewhere in the building.

The route, a blend of the Union Pacific Railroad and Burlington Northern Santa Fe tracks, would put stations in downtown Fresno on Mariposa Street and in Merced between Martin Luther King Jr. Way and G Street.

The recommendation will be included in the final environmental impact report, which would be published in February next year, according to authority officials.

The hybrid route would have less impact on natural resources than the BNSF alternative and fewer impacts on noise, dust and air quality and more, according to high-speed rail documents.

It would cost an estimated \$3.8 billion to \$4.8 billion, according to Rachel Wall, authority spokeswoman. The entire project costs \$65 billion, but \$98 billion when adjusted for inflation, she said.

The project is furthest along in environmental work in the statewide system between Merced and Fresno, according to Dan Leavitt, deputy director for HSR planning. And it's also where construction will be initiated for the statewide high-speed rail system.

In the packed city council chambers, people took advantage of public-comment time to discuss the hybrid route, job creation, the cost of mitigation and the agricultural impact.

Comments from officials representing cities along the proposed route, citizens and students favored the hybrid route for the north-south alignment between Merced and Fresno, citing the number of jobs that would be available to California workers, and the ease of travel between the Valley and the rest of the state. But others, particularly those representing Chowchilla and Madera, voiced their unhappiness, accusing the authority of running over their town and ruining prime ag land.

Chief among their complaints: The authority didn't properly consider alternative alignments.

The project would put union and non-union workers to work, according to Jack Munoz, business manager and secretary-treasurer of Laborers' International Union of North America. More than 20 workers from the union of construction workers were standing outside city hall with banners. "It would put a lot of people to work," Munoz said.

Students from University of California at Merced dressed up like a high-speed train and walked around outside City Hall chanting, "We want jobs, we want rail!" Ryan Heller, a UC Merced senior, founded "I Will Ride," a new student organization that backs high-speed rail. Heller said he would still be in California when the rail would be built. "We're the ones advocating build it, pay for it, ride it," he said.

The San Joaquin Valley tends to get overlooked, according to former Merced Mayor Bill Spriggs. "Dollars will be spent on public transportation in California one way or another. This population is going to double in the next 40 years. It's about the future, not about today," he said.

In other action:

-- Board members extended the public comment period for the 2012 draft business plan until Jan. 16.

-- The authority said it plans to let its \$9 million contract with Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide expire next week. The decision comes in the wake of a report this month by The Sacramento Bee that exposed millions of dollars in regional outreach buried in subcontracts. The board said Tuesday that it will consider handling public relations in-house.

-- The board didn't consider a location for the heavy maintenance facility, which will be dealt with later.

Tulare County supervisors OK seeking \$60m for new Porterville-area jail

By David Castellon

Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register, Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2011

The Tulare County Board of Supervisors has authorized Sheriff Bill Wittman to apply for a \$60 million state grant to fund construction of a new 200-bed jail in the Porterville area.

Wittman, along with sheriff's Capt. Robin Skyles, told the supervisors Tuesday that the proposed jail is needed because the number of people that the county has to incarcerate is growing, particularly since the state began Oct. 1 to send low-risk offenders and parolees to county jails instead of state prison.

As of Tuesday morning, Tulare County jails had 67 state prisoners — people convicted of non-violent, non-sexual, non-serious crimes and called "non-non-nons" — and 90 other people held for suspected state parole violations.

So far, Tulare County has managed to keep up with the influx of added inmates because it had 234 unused beds at the Adult Pre-trial Facility north of Visalia when the realignment started.

Wittman said there are still about 100 unused beds available.

"So far, we haven't needed to release anyone early," Wittman told the supervisors.

That likely will change once the realignment plan is fully implemented in about four years because the county will have to contend with an estimated 540 non-non-nons who need to be incarcerated at any given time.

"We're going to have to have another 300 beds," Wittman said.

For now, he said, his department wants to build a two-story, 200-bed facility in the Porterville area that could eventually expand into a 350-bed facility. It could be ready to occupy four years after money from the state is committed.

Currently, the county operates four jails with the following capacities:

- Main Jail: 264 beds
- Bob Wiley Detention Facility: 366 beds
- Pre-trial Facility: 384 beds
- Men's Correctional Facility: 302 beds currently available.

Wittman said he can't use a 64-bed section of the Men's Correctional Facility, which opened in the 1940s, because it has a leaky roof, mold and damage caused by flooding earlier this year.

His department can't pay for the renovations and repairs to make it habitable.

All four jails are in the north part of the county.

Wittman told the board that it makes sense to put a new jail in the south county because construction is planned for early next year on a new, larger courthouse in downtown Porterville, and inmates could be taken far shorter distances from a nearby jail rather than transporting them a minimum 30 miles from one of the current jails.

Estimates provided by the Sheriff's Department state a new "South County Detention Facility" could cut 68,500 prisoner miles off the Sheriff's Department's vehicle travel — which includes eliminating the need to move people arrested in the south county to north county jails — and a combined 160,000 miles of travel yearly by the Sheriff's Department, friends and family of inmates, attorneys, bail bondsmen and others who normally would have to go to the north county to get to a jail.

The department estimated that cost savings would total about \$557,000 a year — \$426,000 of which would come from labor costs as deputies would spend less time transporting inmates, with the rest coming from lower vehicle fuel and maintenance costs.

Sheriff's officials noted in their presentation that about 34 percent of inmates currently booked into county jails were arrested on suspicion of offenses committed in the south county.

Skyles also noted that the two-year construction would boost jobs in the south county, and once the jail opened, the number of people working and living in the Porterville area would boost the region's economy.

As for paying for the jail, about 90 percent of the cost would come from Assembly Bill 900, the Public Safety and Offender Rehabilitation Services Act of 2007, which funds construction and renovations of state prisons and county jails.

Wittman said he considered applying for the funds in the past, but didn't bring it to the board because a 25 percent match was required, and there were several requirements on how the jail would have to be run to qualify.

In August, sheriff's officials learned that the requirements had been modified, with only a 10 percent local match required and fewer restrictions, he said.

As such, the county would have to come up with only about \$6 million if the California Corrections Standards Authority authorizes the full grant.

Sheriff's officials estimate the costs of operating a new jail at more than \$6.1 million a year.

So far, the state has provided funding to help counties pay for jail realignments, but county officials have noted that there are no guarantees that funding will be there in future years.

The last Tulare County jail built was the \$21 million Pre-trial Facility, opened in November 1999, but it closed 18 months later because of a lack of inmates and county budget cuts.

In November 2004, the Sheriff's Department began reopening sections — or "pods" — of the jail with money from contracts to house state and federal inmates. Unused beds in those pods were occupied by county inmates.

As a result of the Oct. 1 realignment, Skyles said all but two 50-bed pods of the jail are open.

Wittman said the need for extra jail beds is inevitable, and he expects that the state will provide realignment funds in the future to help pay for operating a new jail without the county having to dip into its own funds.

But those realignment funds can't pay for jail construction, which means that the county would have to come up with matching funds if the grant is awarded.

"\$6 [million] for \$60 [million]. That's pretty good odds in Vegas, I think," said Supervisor Phil Cox, who voted with the other four supervisors to allow Wittman to apply for the grant.

And the county might not have to come up with the entire match, he said, explaining that if the jail were built on land the county already owns near the Porterville courthouse site and county staff does some of the planning work in-house, the dollar match the county has to come up with may be only about \$4 million.

Wittman said his office will look for other grants to offset the county's costs, while [Supervisor Steve Worthley noted the county may qualify for air quality grants because building a new jail would reduce vehicle travel, promoting smog reduction.](#)

The grant awards could be announced in March and the jail could be built four years later if the state doesn't delay the funding.

Worthley noted that even if funding is awarded, the county might still have to build extra space at the Bob Wiley Detention Facility.

Supervisor Pete Vander Poel added that extra jail space is needed and "when we can get 90 percent of the money from another source ... I think that's something we need to do."

Wittman said that if the full \$60 million is awarded for a south county jail, construction costs are low enough now that he might be able to "squeeze out" a 300-bed facility.

If the full amount isn't awarded, Wittman said he'll work to build a smaller jail with room to expand because every extra bed he can get will be needed.