

Council endorses Route A1

Supported path for high-speed rail is east of Madera

By Tami Jo Nix

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The Madera City Council has decided to back the route for the proposed California High-Speed Rail tracks that would run east of the city, along the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad right-of-way.

The council had been informed, in a report by City Administrator David Tooley, that the California High-Speed Rail Authority was under the impression the council had no preference for a route. An expression of no preference would mean the authority wouldn't have to weigh the city's wishes in choosing a final right-of-way.

The Burlington Northern proposed route, referred to by the authority as route A-1, would miss most of the city.

Route A-2, however, which would parallel the Union Pacific right-of-way, would run through the middle of Madera and Chowchilla, taking out a swath of retail and commercial businesses, as well as some planned retail sites.

Both routes have had backers.

But at Tuesday night's council meeting, the arguments for route A-1 swayed the council. Those arguments primarily were that while A-1 had its problems, such as taking out ribbons of agricultural land, it would be less damaging to the city than route A-2.

Backers of A-2 maintained that the rail system would pay the city millions of dollars in mitigation fees to repair the harm that building the high-speed rail line through the city would cause.

City officials, however, said they doubted enough money would be available for mitigation if the line ever is built.

Tooley said the rail system would be hard pressed to make mitigation funding available if A-2 were selected.

Backers of A-2 also said they felt choosing the A-2 route would increase the chances that a proposed heavy-maintenance facility for the trains would be built in Madera County. Five sites in the county are among several under consideration for the facility, which reportedly would generate some 5,000 jobs during construction and some 1,500 permanent jobs once in operation.

Council chambers were packed for the rail-route discussion.

Mayor Gary Svanda invited members of the audience who wished to speak in favor of the A-2 alignment to address the assembly.

Area 6 School Board trustee Ricardo Arredondo spoke about the lack of definitive information as to right-of-way acquisition of the A-2 route. He also stated that one of the city's reports said the elevated tracks may be as high as 40 feet and compared it to the five-floor Madera Valley Inn, stating that its roof line is at 45 feet.

"That would make each floor of the Madera Valley Inn, just nine foot per level," he said. "That is misrepresented."

He was referring to Tooley's report, which compared the proposed height of the railroad structure — 40 feet — to the height of the Madera Valley Inn, which he said was 45 feet.

Earlier in the meeting, Councilman Sam Armentrout had suggested the council delay a vote on the matter until a scheduled meeting with rail authority people on Monday.

Arredondo said he supported Armentrout's idea suggestion.

Ed McIntyre addressed the council, saying his name was mentioned in Tooley's report to the council. A local real estate agent, McIntyre, and his wife, Gail, own property adjacent to the A-2 alignment, that he said would be affected. But he said he was confident mitigation money would be available.

"I know mitigation is required by law by both the federal and state environmental process," he said. "They have to off-set the impacts of the project."

He said that this route would make his property land-locked but he viewed it as an opportunity to reroute traffic bottlenecks in that area.

Rochelle Noblett, owner of Pete's Sport Shop, spoke in favor of the A-2 alignment. As the owner of a 51-year-old business in downtown Madera, she said, this route would affect her. She said she could envision landscaped areas, walkways under and to the side of the railroad towers, and soccer fields at the end of E Street and Olive Avenue, adjacent to the rails.

"The only building standing in the way worth saving is the old train station. We should ask the state to pick it up and move it," she said.

She said she was excited about the project and also offered to be on a citizens mitigation commission should one be formed, she said.

Jim Taubert, executive director of the Madera Redevelopment Agency, said his experiences with the state in the new courthouse project on 6th Avenue between G and H streets, had made him doubt the state would be forthcoming with much in the way of mitigation money.

He said he didn't have a lot of faith in the state and its ability to come in and give Madera millions of dollars for repairing the damage the construction of the system would do.

The state has unique powers, he said, which include the ability to change the rules.

"We should learn from the courthouse project," he said. The mayor opened the floor to those in the audience who wanted to speak in favor of the A-1 alignment.

Ben Reiling CEO of Zellman Development Company spoke about the 100-acre property that his company owns in the Avenue 17 area. They have already spent a few dollars short of \$20 million on the project so far, he said. If the A2 site is adopted, he does not see the landscape doing anything other than remaining as it is. If the A-1 route is chosen he believes that in the not too distant future there could be a 600 or 700 thousand square-foot shopping center built there anchored by Target, he said.

Target remain interested in building a store in Madera in spite of the fact that in this economy they have only built six stores in the last year, compared to the 25 stores they opened at the height of the boom.

Chowchilla Mayor Jim Kopshever presented a letter from his council endorsing the A-1 route with modifications to minimize impacts and the effects on both the cities of Chowchilla and Madera.

After all the testimony, the council in a unanimous vote adopted a resolution endorsing the A-1 route.

In other business:

- A presentation from Eric Johnson of AT&T asked for and received the support of the council for its No Texting While Driving campaign.
- The council directed that the city's flags be flown at half staff in honor of the recently deceased former chief of police, Jerry Noblett.