

Valley rail options create friction

Madera County cities, farmers split on route.

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By Russell Clemings / The Fresno Bee

Fresno can't wait for the day when California's planned high-speed rail line runs right through the center of town.

But the city's neighbors in Madera County want nothing to do with the thing.

With no prospect of the 220 mph trains ever stopping in their towns, officials in both Madera and Chowchilla say they would like to banish the route to the countryside east of them.

That puts them in conflict with farmers, who worry that the eastern route -- generally following the Burlington Northern Santa Fe corridor used by Amtrak's San Joaquin trains -- could interfere with agriculture.

The disagreement is one of many that need to be resolved over the next year, as the California High-Speed Rail Authority firms up plans for the first phase of a system that is supposed to be ready to start construction in 2012.

Opposition led by Madera County farm interests has already defeated a proposal to run the high-speed rail line through rural areas west of the cities.

That route has also been discussed as an eventual Highway 99 truck bypass or other transit corridor. But it would have split many existing parcels and made them more difficult to farm efficiently, said Julia Berry, executive director of Madera County Farm Bureau.

As a result, the California High-Speed Rail Authority board voted April 8 to drop that western route from further consideration. Now, the debate is centered on two remaining alternatives.

One generally follows the Union Pacific Railroad tracks from Merced to Fresno, closely following Highway 99. The other departs Merced on the BNSF line, swings east of Chowchilla and Madera, then rejoins the Union Pacific corridor near the San Joaquin River.

The BNSF route had been designated as the system's preferred route when its first major environmental report was released in 2005. But it was nearly dropped from consideration because of the potential conflicts with farming -- and because it is slightly longer than the other options and slower than most. Only after the western route was rejected did the BNSF option become a leading alternative again.

That pleased the two Madera County cities, which don't like the idea of two new sets of high-speed tracks running through the center of their towns alongside the Union Pacific corridor. The line would create another barrier running through the towns and could displace businesses or interfere with development, they say.

Chowchilla's City Council will be asked Monday to take an official position favoring the BNSF route and opposing the UP route, Mayor Jim Kopshever said. The UP option, he said, is causing "an enormous amount of concern" in the city.

"For Chowchilla specifically, it would completely eliminate our retail and commercial corridor along Highway 99," Kopshever said.

Madera has not yet taken an official position but is likewise firmly against the UP alignment, said City Council Member Robert Poythress. The city just finished an update of its main planning document, the general plan, and "a high-speed rail route through the center of our town was not in that general plan," Poythress said.

Both cities are concerned about the physical separation that a new rail line could impose on them. In Madera, Poythress said, the city is already cut in half by the UP tracks and Highway 99; a high-speed rail line would only worsen that division.

"We're trying to unify, not separate things," he said.

Another complication facing the UP route is the freight railroad itself. In a report for the April 8 meeting, the authority said UP was reluctant to cooperate with the high-speed rail plan, fearing it could prevent it from adding spurs to serve new customers.

The railroad's concerns are more significant in rural areas than in already developed areas like Fresno, where all of the current route alternatives follow the UP corridor, said Carrie Bowen, the authority's Central Valley regional director.

The farm bureau has not yet taken a position in opposition to the BNSF route but is concerned about possible effects of the high-speed trains, Berry said. Even if the new tracks run alongside an existing freight railroad, they are "also going to cut through a lot of farm properties," she said.

And there are other concerns, she said: Wind from rapid train movements could disorient bees pollinating almond orchards, and there could be severe restrictions on pesticide spraying near the trains.

Bowen said the authority's current schedule calls for final decisions on the system's San Joaquin Valley routes to be made by fall 2011 so that design and early construction can proceed before a September 2012 deadline on the use of \$2.25 billion in federal stimulus funding.

The \$42.6 billion system also has \$9 billion from a 2008 state bond issue and is counting on more federal funding, local government contributions and private financing to cover the rest.