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Worries Follow Route of High-Speed California Line

By JESSE MCKINLEY

MADERA, Calif. — The area just south of this agricultural city is not much to look at: miles of farmland, a collection of dingy fast food outlets and a gold rush ghost called Borden, where all that remains is a tiny cemetery devoted to long dead Chinese workers.

But sometime soon, this flat-on-flat expanse — about 150 miles southeast of San Francisco — may well be home to a first-in-the-nation destination as the initial northern terminus of California's ambitious [high-speed rail](#) network.

Under a plan approved in early December, the inaugural stretch of the multispurred 800-mile system will eventually connect San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego and Sacramento and other major California cities and will run through the state's farm-rich Central Valley.

Federal and state authorities have committed some \$5.5 billion to the first leg of the project, which will connect Bakersfield, the valley's southern hub, and the unincorporated area south of Madera.

Construction of what will be the first high-speed rail line in the United States is to begin in 2012 and run through 2017, with the promise of creating tens — even hundreds — of thousands of jobs in an area that suffers some of the highest unemployment rates in the state.

But despite the potential bounty of jobs, high-speed rail has not been fully embraced. After the rail authority approved the initial route in early December, Representative Dennis Cardoza, a Central Valley Democrat, disparagingly referred to it as “the train to nowhere.”

“For the California High-Speed Rail Authority to choose this route is to significantly undermine the public’s trust, marks a gross misuse of taxpayer funds and will alienate significant supporters of the project,” he said.

Part of that agita, of course, may be that the first section of high-speed rail will not pass through his district.

But the congressman is not the only person complaining. Several towns have passed resolutions opposing the project because of worries about the disruption of a 220-mile-an-hour train zipping through downtown districts.

And in the Central Valley, where huge, decades-old government irrigation projects have helped turned California into an agricultural powerhouse, farmers have grumbled about the rail project gobbling up valuable farm land.

“We’re of the belief that the productive farmland is an environmental and societal benefit, and we ought to be doing whatever we can to keep that land productive,” said Dave Kranz, a spokesman for the California Farm Bureau. “And once it’s gone, it’s gone forever.”

Roelof van Ark, the chief executive of the California High-Speed Rail Authority, which is overseeing the project, said he was trying not to take criticism of the project personally. “It’s not about today; it’s about the future,” Mr. van Ark said. “I hope that Mr. Cardoza and others will see the light.”

On Dec. 9, California’s rail authority received a windfall of additional federal stimulus money — some \$600 million — when Republican governors in Ohio and Wisconsin passed on money intended for their states. California voters approved high-speed rail in 2008, and deadlines are already passing, including a Dec. 31 cutoff for the state to finalize a plan to spend federal money in the Central Valley.

Initial spending will span a raft of projects, including designing stations, redirecting nearby roads and acquiring land.

Still, many details need to be worked out, including the exact route, which must be able to accommodate conventional train systems in case the high-speed rail project fails to find enough financing to be completed. And that uncertainty unsettles local leaders.

“The communication has just been atrocious,” said Mayor Robert Poythress of Madera. “If there have been any messages, they’ve been mixed.”

Ronald W. Hoggard, the city manager of Corcoran, to the south, echoes that sentiment, worrying that the big money involved in the high-speed project — the eventual price will be more than \$40 billion — will roll over his small-town concerns. “When they talk about ‘the train to nowhere,’ we’re not nowhere,” Mr. Hoggard said. “We’re Mayberry.”

Mr. Hoggard says Corcoran, a city of 26,000 — including 12,000 “guests of the state” at nearby prisons — had spent years painstakingly restoring its main street, repainting store facades and improving City Hall, and he worries that the train will distract from the city’s carefully shaped character.

“If they were to come through town, with an elevated track, at 85 decibels?” he said. “It’s just inconsistent.”

Mr. van Ark said elevated lines passing through city centers were a possibility, but he played down their impact on small-town life. “Trains do run through the centers of town in the rest of the world,” he said.

The Central Valley is accustomed to rail lines, with freight trains loaded with double-decker cargo cars rolling day and night. And Corcoran itself has a small, quaint [Amtrak](#) depot in its downtown core.

Still, the selection of the first segment of rail line was a surprise. Other options included connecting major cities, like Los Angeles and Anaheim or San Francisco and San Jose. But the Federal Rail

Administration required that the first federal money be spent in the hard-hit Central Valley.

Mr. van Ark pleads for patience, saying, "This is not about building a line in the Central Valley." And indeed, while the first link may run from Bakersfield to that ghostly area outside Borden, that is not the final destination anyone has in mind.

"This is all about building an intercity, high-speed network," he said. "One must put that above where this will start."



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