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High-speed rail project hit by civil rights complaint

Two groups contend that minority businesses have been largely left out of California bullet-train contracts so far.

By Dan Weikel, Los Angeles Times

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Civil rights advocates and a business coalition Wednesday demanded that the federal government investigate whether the California high-speed rail project has systematically excluded minority-owned companies from bullet train contracts.

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The Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights in San Francisco and the Associated Professionals and Contractors, an alliance of minority businesses, lodged a formal complaint with the U.S. Department of Transportation, alleging that the California High-Speed Rail Authority has violated the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964.

They contend that the project's effort to involve minority companies has been poor and that only about 12 minority-owned firms out of 134 prime contractors and subcontractors have shared in the authority's 10 largest contracts so far. The complaint alleges that many of the minority businesses were hired for small amounts, such as \$100,000 for consulting work related to a \$75-million contract.

The authority plans to build a 500-mile system, with trains running up to 220 mph between Anaheim and San Francisco. Extensions to Sacramento and San Diego would be built later. So far, about \$3 billion in federal funds have been approved for the project.

"This \$43-billion undertaking appears to not be for all citizens of California, but for the middle-class and a small group of large established companies," said Frederick Jordan, president of the San Francisco African American Chamber of Commerce. "Minority-owned business and small business have been almost totally left out of the planning, engineering and construction of this project."

High-speed rail officials said the federal civil rights laws apply to federal funding, which the authority has not received yet. When contracts were awarded in 2007, they added, the project complied with all state requirements, including public notifications about the contracting process.

"California's high-speed train project is and has been in full compliance with the law," said Valerie Martinez, the authority's small business liaison and outreach manager. "We are committed to further ensuring that every Californian and every community has an equal opportunity to access the economic benefits of the project."

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