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High Speed Rail Authority approves what critics call 'train to nowhere'

First segment would run from tiny Borden to Corcoran, an area hit so hard by the recession and agriculture declines that it has been dubbed the New Appalachia.

By Dan Weikel and Rich Connell, Los Angeles Times

December 3, 2010

Citing a need for jobs and fast approaching federal deadlines for funding, the California High Speed Rail Authority board Thursday unanimously approved construction of the first leg of the state's proposed bullet train — a 65-mile section in the Central Valley that would not carry passengers until more of the system is built.

Costing at least \$4.15 billion, the segment would run from the tiny town of Borden to Corcoran, an area hit so hard by the recession and agriculture declines that it has been dubbed the New Appalachia. Stations would be built in Fresno and Hanford.

Included in the plan are tracks, station platforms, bridges and viaducts, which would elevate the line through urban areas. The initial section, however, would not be equipped with maintenance facilities, locomotives, passenger cars or an electrical system necessary to power high-speed trains.

Critics of the initial segment selection, including Rep. Dennis Cardoza (D-Merced), have dubbed it a "train to nowhere."

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But board members said the choice makes the best use of available money, meets federal requirements and should be viewed in terms of the project's long-range goal of connecting major population centers.

"We wouldn't be here if we thought we would only build one segment of the system," said Tom Umberg, a former state legislator from Orange County and vice chairman of the high-speed rail board.

The project's first full phase is supposed to extend more than 500 miles, with trains running up to 220 mph between Anaheim and San Francisco. Extensions to Sacramento and San Diego would be built later.

Despite reservations of some board members, the panel voted 7 to 0 to select a segment recommended by the authority's staff. Anaheim Mayor Curt Pringle, the board's chairman, was absent. Richard Katz, a Los Angeles County transportation official, resigned from the board Wednesday.

How long the first section of track would remain dormant is unclear. It would use up virtually all of the federal money now available for the project, and future funding to finish the \$43-billion project could be threatened by the \$1.3-trillion federal deficit.

Some Republicans in Congress want to pull back \$2 billion in federal stimulus money pledged to the project but not yet allocated. There also are questions about the authority's ability to attract private investors and funding from local governments along the route.

Several residents and civic leaders in the Central Valley strongly endorsed the project and the initial Central Valley segment at Thursday's board meeting. But even some bullet train backers criticized the plan to start with a segment that does not connect major cities.

Given the funding uncertainties, some cities are worried about how long it will take for extensions to reach them.

Merced Mayor Bill Spriggs expressed concern that the proposed segment won't reach the most populated areas where the jobless rates run as high as 25%, among the worst in the nation. Officials there fear that they "will be left out for a long, long time," Spriggs said.

Stockton Mayor Ann Johnston described the bullet train as a "fabulous" project but expressed dismay that the initial segment did not link Merced and Fresno, two university towns. The initial leg should not "go from one unknown location to another unknown location," she told the board.

Supporters of the route took umbrage at the suggestion that the rail system was starting in an

area of little transportation consequence.

"This is not a train to nowhere," Visalia Mayor Bob Link said. "Fresno is one of the largest cities in California."

Former Los Banos Assemblyman Rusty Areias made an impassioned plea for the project, which is expected to create thousands of jobs. " 'Nowhere' will never share in the prosperity of this state until you do something about its relative isolation... it will remain the New Appalachia."

The Central Valley was targeted as a starting point to rapidly create jobs and avoid the expected resistance in Los Angeles and San Francisco, said Rob Kulat, a Federal Railroad Administration spokesman.

"It's a starting point for the larger development and it has to be really seen in that context," Kulat said.

The selection was made as a December deadline looms to secure federal money approved for the project.

State Sen. Alan Lowenthal (D-Long Beach), who chairs the Senate committee that oversees the high-speed rail project, said the board is acting prematurely. Critical questions about financial management, future funding, ridership projections and other issues have not been answered, he said.

"You don't want to lose the federal funds, but you don't want to make a poor decision in a panic mode," he said.

The agency could be creating an "orphan" stretch of track, Lowenthal said, that will never be used by high-speed trains.

To satisfy federal requirements, the starter route must have "independent utility." That is, other passenger railroads must be able to use the track if funding dries up and high-speed trains never come to fruition. The rail authority says Amtrak's well-established San Joaquin service could shift from its conventional track to the high-speed route between Borden and Corcoran in such a case.

Amtrak trains might be able to go faster on the line, but how much actual benefit the passengers on the San Joaquin service would realize hasn't been determined.

"You could run Amtrak on it, but lots of work needs to be done," said Bill Bronte, head of Caltrans' rail division. "The impact on ridership needs to be addressed.... The improvements in performance might be less than one would expect."

Using the first segment for Amtrak trains "is a worst-case scenario that no one ever anticipates having to implement," the authority's Chief Deputy Executive Director Carrie Pourvahidi told the board.

Congressman Cardoza has called for the U.S. Department of Transportation to investigate the process used to select the first segment. He contends that official discussions have long focused on segments from Merced to Fresno or Fresno to Bakersfield.

"The authority staff has never vetted the Corcoran to Borden route with the public," said Cardoza, whose district would have been the site for a station and a maintenance facility had the Merced to Fresno route been selected. An authority spokesman said there was a public misconception that only two valley options linking large cities could be considered.

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