

Will ACE roll into Modesto? Feasibility study wins approval

By Kevin Valine

Modesto Bee, Wednesday, January 16, 2013

A future train station for high-speed rail in downtown Modesto could within a decade include commuter trains that take workers to their jobs in the Bay Area.

Bringing Altamont Commuter Express trains to Modesto is among the details in a \$100,000 feasibility study that the City Council's Economic Development Committee approved Monday.

Although there have been proposals to extend ACE to Stanislaus County since the commuter service started in 1998, commuters here still drive or take the bus to the Lathrop-Manteca ACE station to catch a train.

ACE Executive Director Stacey Mortensen said Tuesday that the current proposal has the best chance of becoming a reality, in large part because of the state's effort to build 800 miles of rail for high-speed trains, linking the Bay Area with Southern California via Sacramento and the San Joaquin Valley. Construction on the project's first phase, south of Merced, could start this year.

In its revised 2012 business plan, the California High-Speed Rail Authority stated that it wants to integrate its high-speed rail with existing rail systems such as ACE. Mortensen said that while it could be 40 years before high-speed rail comes to Modesto, ACE could extend service to Modesto by 2022.

"ACE is really our only option" in the short term, Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors Chairman Vito Chiesa said Tuesday. "We really need to start pushing."

Chiesa also serves as chairman of the San Joaquin Valley Rail Committee, which advises Caltrans on Amtrak service in the valley. He said he will advocate bringing ACE to Modesto and then to Turlock and Merced. Mortensen said plans are being developed to extend ACE service south of Modesto.

Mortensen said ACE's board of directors has made serving Modesto one of its top priorities. She plans to ask the San Joaquin and Stanislaus councils of governments, which deal with transportation issues, to do the same.

ACE serves about 3,700 commuters a day. It has stations in Stockton, Lathrop-Manteca and Tracy, as well as Livermore, Pleasanton and San Jose. Mortensen said 350 to 500 of its commuters are from south of Lathrop, primarily Stanislaus County. She said extending ACE service to Modesto could triple that ridership.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority tracks would parallel existing tracks, either next to the Union Pacific rails through Modesto, as city officials hope, or the Burlington Northern Santa Fe tracks east of Modesto.

Build tracks or use UP?

Mortensen expects the high-speed rail will parallel UP tracks, which, unlike the BNSF tracks, are along population centers. ACE trains would use the high-speed rails. But as an interim measure, Mortensen said, ACE would build its own line parallel to the UP line. That could cost \$170 million, according to a conceptual estimate.

She said Union Pacific is reluctant to let ACE use its rails for the Modesto expansion because the high volume of freight shipped on those rails makes it difficult to add commuter trains.

The feasibility study identified three locations for the train station, all of which incorporate Modesto's Ninth Street Transportation Center, which is a hub for bus service.

The cost of acquiring the land for the station is \$2.6 million to \$10.2 million, depending on the location. The study estimates the cost of acquiring the land for a 150-foot-wide corridor for high-speed trains at \$160 million.

At Monday's meeting, Modesto officials stressed the feasibility study is just that. "This is a study," Planning Manager Patrick Kelly said. "It's not a project, it's not a plan. It's just a study."

City officials reiterated that point when an audience member asked about the train station's impact on nearby St. Stanislaus Catholic Church, whose land is not part of three proposed station locations.

Officials said if the City Council were to move forward with a train station, that would entail a raft of detailed studies examining such issues as noise and traffic. The city would have to gain support and funding for the project.

City officials say a train station could be a boon for the downtown and region. It could serve as a catalyst for economic development. Chiesa added that rail service would reduce the number of cars on congested and battered roads and help reduce air pollution.

The California Department of Transportation provided Modesto with a \$100,000 grant for the study. The Economic Development Committee voted 2-1 to accept the study, with council members Stephanie Burnside and John Gunderson voting "yes."

Councilman Dave Geer voted "no." He opposes the state's high-speed rail project because he believes it will cost too much and will not have enough riders.

The study goes to the City Council on Feb. 12 for acceptance. But nothing will happen unless the council directs staff to take further action.

To see the study, go to www.modestogov.com/ced/rail and click on the link for Draft Final Downtown Passenger Rail Station Feasibility Study.

Board votes on compromise that will double no-burn days

Owners of clean-burning stoves to get benefits

By Garth Stapley, Modesto Bee

In the Merced Sun-Star, Wednesday, January 16, 2014

Fireplace burning could be severely restricted much sooner than initially proposed, while people with cleaner-burning wood and pellet stoves are likely to get more leeway than they do now, air quality officials have decided.

The number of no-burn days in Merced County is expected to more than double for people with open-hearth fireplaces by 2014, two years earlier than expected, officials unanimously decreed with the landmark vote after hours of testimony from opposing sides.

As a compromise, clean-burning stove owners should get some sort of special treatment not afforded under current no-burn rules, because their devices produce a fraction of the soot that hurts people's lungs.

The deal was proposed by county Supervisor Bill O'Brien, who is chairman of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's governing board. He figures that soot levels will go down if more people with fireplaces convert to stoves.

"The benefits will be bigger than what we were even expecting," O'Brien said.

Some people relying on wood burning as their only heat source are granted exemptions.

The decision last month puts in motion more than 100 additional regulations expected to improve air quality, especially in the winter. The plan to reduce particulate matter, or PM-2.5, eventually will affect activities such as commercial charbroiling, lawn care, commuting and farming.

Merced County averages 26 no-burn days from Nov. 1 through the end of February; by 2016, that could jump to 63.

Particulate matter is made worse by smoke and vehicle fumes and is harder on lungs than summertime ozone. Further regulating cow manure wouldn't help much, scientists say.

Steve Goldstein, who sells wood and pellet stoves at Modesto's Spa Doctor & Stove Center, said, "We get lip service during these board meetings, but in the end there is never real recognition for the products we offer."

Officials don't have a clear plan on accommodating clean burners, who might trade some privacy for permission to light up. Current technology doesn't distinguish open-hearth smoke from much cleaner stove emissions.

O'Brien said it might work similar to vehicle smog checks, in which a technician verifies a clean-burning device and issues a permit. Details, such as how to pay for that bureaucracy and thresholds for clean burners as opposed to regular fireplaces, should come forth as staff recommendations in coming months.

Area representatives on the board, all of whom voted for the compromise, were Ceres Mayor Chris Vierra, San Joaquin County Supervisor Leroy Ornellas and Merced County Supervisor Hub Walsh.

Industry representatives said companies have gone to great lengths to adapt to rules, sometimes at considerable expense.

Almond branches now are chopped instead of being burned, but small sticks cause problems requiring more equipment, said Kelly Covello of the Almond Hullers and Processors Association.

More regulations "are truly a hardship on some folks. We adjust or we don't survive," said Katie Patterson of the San Joaquin County Farm Bureau.

Deal made to cut diesel truck emissions

By Seth Nidever

Hanford Sentinel, Tuesday, Jan. 15, 2013

KETTLEMAN CITY — In a rare display of cooperation, government agencies, environmentalists and businesses have reached an agreement to reduce diesel truck idling in Kettleman City and Avenal.

The announcement of the deal was made Monday by Greenaction, a Bay-Area group with local ties that worked with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, local business and residents to reach the voluntary agreement.

"In a community suffering from too much pollution ... this is the first project that concretely has made something of a dent in immediate diesel pollution," said Greenaction executive director Bradley Angel.

Nine businesses in the two towns, including representatives from a large FedEx transfer station in Kettleman City, signed a "good neighbor" agreement committing them to follow idling laws, work to cut emissions with new technology and educate drivers.

"FedEx is committed to the environment and the communities we serve," said Scott Fielder, FedEx spokesman.

"I think it would be a great thing because of the fact that [several companies] use Kettleman City as a place to connect and disconnect trailers," said Bob Lewis, president of the Kettleman City Chamber of Commerce.

"They sit there and idle their trucks while they wait for another load to get there. That's a situation that needs to be corrected."

Diesel idling is a major source of pollution in those communities, particularly in Kettleman City, which is a transfer area for trucking companies traveling from Los Angeles to San Francisco.

Kettleman City has experienced birth defect and cancer problems that some blame in part on diesel, a known carcinogen with a wide range of harmful health effects. Others cite the Chem Waste hazmat landfill 3.5 miles southwest of town, though studies have shown no direct link between the health problems and that facility.

Chem Waste trucks passing through Kettleman on their way to the landfill weren't included in the agreement because Greenaction opposes the landfill, Angel said.

The state Department of Toxic Substances Control is considering whether to approve an application to build a new hazardous landfill at the site.

[Bakersfield Californian Op-Ed, Tuesday, Jan. 15, 2013:](#)

ANOTHER VIEW: Keeping high-speed rail on track requires courage, vision

By Terry Phillips

Let's be clear. The people have spoken. California is going to build a high-speed rail system.

In a recent essay ("California high-speed rail plan is simply a Field of Dreams," Jan. 15), Reps. Kevin McCarthy and Jeff Denham advocated a cut-and-run policy. I respectfully disagree.

While one may quibble over details, the time for debating whether to authorize this project is over. We are moving forward. A process is in place to construct a world-class transportation system. It will create thousands of good jobs, produce economic opportunities, alleviate highway congestion and mitigate air pollution.

Unfortunately, a few are still trying to campaign against us. After having lost at the ballot box, they now want to use the planning process to kill the project. It won't work.

Some politicians who supported HSR when things were easy have turned out to be fair-weather friends who run for the hills when there are troubles.

One of the chief arguments flung against this project is that we can't afford it. America faced greater financial troubles during the Great Depression, and yet we build the Hoover and Grand Coulee dams, the Golden Gate Bridge and New York's Lincoln Tunnel to name but a few. That required courage and leadership beyond the ability to say "no."

It is hypocritical to attack the lack of resources when McCarthy tries to take away the very federal funds he promised five years ago. He originally supported money for HSR, then introduced a bill (HR 3143) to freeze those dollars earmarked for the project. That puts a greater burden on California taxpayers. What's worse, he routinely compares government budgets with family budgets. That is the reddest of red herrings.

Suggesting that we should get our fiscal house in order before starting this project misses the point. HSR will be a major boon toward fiscal solvency.

Another criticism is that anticipated ridership has been exaggerated. In fact, it is impossible to measure something that doesn't exist yet. Moreover, the greater value of this project is not how many people ride in one year. It is the benefit of cumulative ridership in decades and centuries.

Besides, when has the investment in major transportation infrastructure ever been a bad idea? The interstate highway system? Our nation's airports? NASA?

If you wish to compare this to your family budget, consider the value of putting a new roof on the house -- or the consequences of failing to do so.

As with all big government programs, HSR will undoubtedly have cost overruns. It will also require modifications from the original plan. An experienced entrepreneur would know that all successful businesses must deal with many challenges. Those who think otherwise are naive or dishonest or both.

Ironically, McCarthy was one of the congressional delegates who campaigned to put Proposition 1A on the ballot in 2008. (That's the initiative that authorized funding for California high-speed rail.) But when electoral winds began to blow against him, he flip-flopped.

If these critics are truly concerned about local communities, they would rally behind this project. Instead, they exploit their positions of public trust and obstruct the will of the people.

This vital infrastructure project is too important to be treated as a political football. We need to come together and stop allowing selfish sore losers to interfere with our best interests.

McCarthy often refers to the baseball movie "Moneyball," in which Oakland A's general manager Billy Beane famously asks, "You think losing is fun?" My favorite baseball movie is "Field of Dreams." To paraphrase its grand philosophy, "If we build it, they will come."

Let's not allow a few naysayers to derail our train to the future. All aboard!