

## High-speed rail board OK's plan to extend route toward Bakersfield

By Courtenay Edelhart, staff writer  
Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2010

The California High-Speed Rail Authority Board voted unanimously Monday to approve committing state funds to extend construction of the first segment of the statewide system south toward Bakersfield.

State matching funds are a requirement for taking advantage of \$616 million in new federal funds that became available nearly two weeks ago after Ohio and Wisconsin opted not to move forward with their own high-speed rail projects. The state money would come from the proceeds of state bonds already approved by voters, but the state Legislature will have to give the OK to disperse the money, which might be contentious because some lawmakers are skeptical of the project.

For his part, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is enthusiastic.

"Today's announcement is a huge step forward for high-speed rail in California," the governor said in a statement issued after the board meeting. "Thanks to the federal government's demonstrated faith in our system and the foresight of California voters, the first stretch of track of this revolutionary system will now reach two major population centers. We are well on our way to breaking ground on this historic venture, and when we do, not only will productivity be enhanced, congestion and [pollution reduced](#) and thousands of jobs created, California's high-speed rail will be the standard by which every other project in the U.S. is measured."

The new federal funding will allow engineers to extend the first leg of the line to be built in California, potentially as many as 120 miles of the project's 520-mile first phase from near Madera to somewhere just north of Bakersfield. That would straddle Fresno and come into the Bakersfield metropolitan area, but not cross the Bakersfield city limit because there isn't enough money to go into the city proper.

The original plan was for a 65-mile segment connecting Borden and Corcoran. Starting with that sparsely populated stretch was favored by staff for engineering reasons, but the decision drew fierce condemnation from critics who said it didn't incorporate large urban centers.

At Monday's board meeting, California High-Speed Rail Authority chief executive officer Roelof van Ark took great pains to emphasize that this was just the beginning for a system that ultimately will stretch from Sacramento to San Diego.

It's not clear yet precisely how far south the first segment would go. Board member Rod Diridon said construction of the first segment would extend "north of Bakersfield, not into Bakersfield."

Project engineers also looked at the option of extending construction north toward Merced, but recommended against it until a final alignment is chosen.

Several alternatives for track routes are being studied for environmental impact, including one favored by Kern County Council of Governments that would run mainly along the BNSF tracks.