

Bullet train runs into rising opposition over Southern California routes



About 300 people, many from the San Fernando Valley, protested the proposed route of the California bullet train at a meeting of the California High-Speed Rail Authority in downtown Los Angeles on Tuesday.

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Over the last decade, the California bullet train has been largely confined to futuristic renderings and promised trips of about 2 1/2 hours from Los Angeles to San Francisco. But as its effects on urban areas come more sharply into focus, opposition is intensifying among people along its path.

The \$68-billion project has already faced lawsuits and political battles in upscale Bay Area cities, as well as Central Valley farmlands, forcing officials to make design concessions and in some cases adding to construction delays.

As the detailed planning process begins to shift to Southern California, community leaders and neighborhood groups are launching challenges to a segment that would run between Palmdale and Burbank.

The conflicts ahead came into focus Tuesday when hundreds gathered in downtown Los Angeles to protest at a meeting of the state board overseeing construction of the system.

During more than six hours of public comment by about 150 people, one speaker after another attacked the project as the eight-member California High-Speed Rail Authority board listened quietly. The testimony came from residents and leaders in small towns and growing suburbs along proposed routes through the mountains north of the Los Angeles basin. Many speakers said the project would devastate their quality of life or their local economy.

Residents of several low-income and predominantly minority communities, including San Fernando, Pacoima and Sylmar, complained that their neighborhoods would be divided by 20-foot-high sound walls along the high-speed train corridor. Some said their areas had been already been chopped up by three major freeways and a dozen dumps.

"Our community's history has been riddled with displacement," said San Fernando resident Genaro Ayala. "My family has all its roots here. I want my grandchildren to grow up here, understanding how great a place it is. We like where we live."

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— Jacqueline Ayer, a mechanical engineer who lives in the community

Rail board chairman Dan Richard said the meeting was the biggest protest he could recall during his tenure.

"What you saw here was the high-water mark of all the different communities affected," Richard said. "It's human nature to look at this from the standpoint of the biggest negative impact."

It wasn't immediately clear how the outpouring of opposition might affect decisions about a route, which could take two years of environmental research and planning to complete.

Board member Lou Correa, a former state senator from Orange County, said he expects the public concern to affect future alignment choices. "There were lots of good comments," he said. "But I detected a little bit of NIMBYism."

Opposition to large transportation projects, such as rail lines and freeways, often intensifies as the plans become more precise and the effects on surrounding residents and businesses more evident, experts say.

"When you get close to an environmental document and a decision point, that's where concern grows," said Mark Watts, interim executive director of Transportation California, a Sacramento advocacy group for transportation projects. As for the opposition emerging in L.A. County, he said, "I can't even fathom what their response is going to be."

Until a year ago, it seemed like the project would encounter limited opposition in Southern California, given the strong support offered by elected officials in Los Angeles and Palmdale.

But as details of possible routes have emerged and the prospect of years of disruption from construction and operation of trains have been spelled out, opponents have become increasingly organized and vocal.

Tuesday's board meeting in Los Angeles followed the release of a key report that analyzed the effects of four different routes.

The 62-page analysis shows that within half a mile of the track from Palmdale to Burbank, there could be noise and vibration affecting about 20,000 residences, 25 parks, 47 schools, 48 churches and nine hotels, as well as archaeological sites and wetlands. At least one route would require trains to travel at 160 mph in a long curved section of track, despite past projections that trains could travel 220 mph after leaving L.A.'s Union Station, the report says.

One of the proposed routes would follow State Route 14, the freeway connecting the L.A. basin to the high desert area in Palmdale. That path would include large sections above ground and a series of tunnels beneath the Angeles National Forest.

The three other routes involve various configurations of tunnels running from the Burbank area to near Acton, where they would surface and continue to Palmdale.

"Acton is devastated by every single route," said Jacqueline Ayer, a mechanical engineer who lives in the community. She said she's studied the route that would follow the 14 and considers it technically flawed.

Some opposition was voiced Tuesday to each alternative. Officials and residents of Santa Clarita, the county's third largest city, joined counterparts in Sylmar, Shadow Hills, Lakeview Terrace and several other communities in attacking the freeway route.

Nancy Lulejian Starczyk, a longtime real estate association executive, said property values in some Santa Clarita areas are already falling because of the potential routes.

Residents of Agua Dulce and Acton said the aboveground rail route would ruin their rural, equestrian communities. They called for a tunneling alternative.

But other residents were strongly opposed to the underground routes, which would be bored through the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument. Speakers from Kagel Canyon said they depend on wells that could be harmed by tunneling. Some warned that train tunnels could disrupt water supplies that are critical to both the city and county of Los Angeles.

Environmental groups have been some of the project's biggest supporters, saying high-speed trains could reduce pollution. George Watland, director of the Angeles Chapter of the Sierra Club, said his organization is still backing the route along the Antelope Valley Freeway because it has the least effect on water tables, wildlife and critical habitat. He said many of his members would object to a tunnel beneath the forest and national monument, even if it were not visible.

"The tunnels have a bigger footprint and high costs, all of which make the project less likely to happen at all," Watland said.

But the freeway alternative affects more homes and businesses. John Rosengrant, owner of an entertainment industry special effects company, told the board Tuesday that he came without prepared remarks and was "speaking from the heart" when he asked them to drop the surface route along the freeway.

Afterward, he said that route could "go through my business in San Fernando and my home in Santa Clarita."

"It is ruining everybody's hopes and dreams and lives," he said. "You can't believe this is happening to you."

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