

Valley may lose voice in high-speed rail planning

Merced Sun-Star, By Mike Jensen

A trip to San Jose from Merced could take just 25 minutes. A trip to San Francisco could take less than an hour.

If California's proposed 700-mile high-speed train is built, San Francisco and Sacramento will be linked to San Diego and Los Angeles, with stops from Modesto to Bakersfield.

About 300 miles of track would run through the Central Valley, but as things stand now, thanks to a veto from Gov. Gray Davis, Valley residents aren't likely to have much say regarding design and construction.

A bill that was overwhelmingly supported by legislators throughout California and the Central Valley would have ensured Central Valley representation on the California High-Speed Rail Authority's governing board.

But the governor vetoed the measure.

Davis could not be reached for comment last week, and a spokeswoman would only cite Davis' veto statement.

It said, "While I agree that the San Joaquin Valley should be fairly represented on the High Speed Rail Authority, I cannot support a measure that constrains my flexibility in making appointments."

When Davis spokesman Russ Lopez was asked to expand on the statement, he said, "I don't know how much more there is to be explained."

The California High-Speed Rail Authority governing board has nine members - five appointed by the governor, two by the Senate Committee on Rules and two by the speaker of the Assembly.

The board currently has five board members from the Bay Area, three from Southern California and one from the Central Valley.

Senate Bill 1799, written by Sen. Charles Poochigian, R-Fresno, would have required that at least two members of the authority board be residents of the San Joaquin Valley.

Poochigian expressed frustration over the Davis veto, but he stopped short of calling it a major setback for the Central Valley.

"For high-speed rail to work, it has to have support from all over California," he told the Sun-Star last week. "It seems logical to me to have a few of the nine-member board be from the Valley."

Although Davis vetoed Poochigian's bill, the governor did sign Senate Bill 1856, putting a \$10 billion bond on the November 2004 ballot to start construction of the rail system.

If voters approve the bond, it will take about 16 years to build all 700 miles of the system, said Mehdi Morshed, executive director of the rail authority.

At this point, it's not known where the track will be laid first or how soon Merced may see its section.

Morshed did say, however, that the tracks in the Central Valley are expected to run parallel to Highway 99. "We are making every effort possible to avoid buying up farm land," he said.

As for Poochigian's bill that would have assured Central Valley representation on the rail authority board, Republicans and Democrats alike supported the legislation.

The Senate approved the bill 34-1 on May 28, and the Assembly approved it 78-0 on Aug. 26. The Senate gave its final approval with a 33-1 vote on Aug. 30.

State Sen. Dick Monteith, R-Modesto, and Assemblyman Dennis Cardoza, D-Merced, both voted in favor of the legislation.

The two legislators are now running for the 18th Congressional District seat currently held by Rep. Gary Condit, D-Ceres.

Candidates seeking to replace them in the state Legislature say they support the high-speed rail and legislation ensuring Central Valley representation on the rail authority.

Assemblywoman Barbara Matthews, D-Tracy, is seeking re-election in the redrawn 17th Assembly District, which will include Merced County.

When asked about the Davis veto, she said, "I'm not surprised." She explained, "No governor wants to give up their flexibility in making appointments."

Merced attorney Brian McCabe, who is challenging Matthews in her bid for re-election, said a high-speed train is needed in the Central Valley. "It's certainly part of the answer to our air quality problem," he said.

Regarding the governor's veto, McCabe said, "That's just another example of the Central Valley getting shortchanged."

Another candidate is Rusty Areias, who is currently on leave from his job as director of the state Department of Parks and Recreation. Areias is a Davis appointee.

Areias is running for the state's 12th Senate District seat, and he has repeatedly discussed

high-speed rail in recent political debates.

Asked about the governor's veto, Areias said, "I don't agree with the governor on everything."

He added, "Putting that bond issue on the ballot is the most important thing."

Republican Jeff Denham, an agricultural businessman who also is seeking the 12th Senate District seat, said he supports building a high-speed train in California and was disappointed that Davis vetoed the bill.

"As we look forward to high-speed rail, it's something we need to work on together," he said.

A meeting of the California High-Speed Rail Authority governing board will take place at 9 a.m. today in Senate Hearing Room 112 of the State Capitol Building, at the corner of 10th and L streets in Sacramento.

The meeting is open to the public.

'Safety and health'

Fresno Bee Letters to the Editor
Consuelo Garza
Clovis

As a longtime resident of the San Joaquin Valley, I have seen the changes that have occurred over the years. As I get older, I depend on getting to where I need to go without having to be stuck in too much traffic, since it is becoming more difficult for me to get out as often as I used to.

We need to make improvements in our streets and roads to ensure that cars, trains, buses and other vehicles are not congesting our streets. Measure C will help improve our air quality by increasing transit services.

As someone whose health is not as good as it used to be, I support any measure that will ensure that my safety and health concerns are addressed.

Minuth hopes to oust Dooley from 20th District

Twin City Times Staff

In his quest for a seat in Congress, Dr. Andre Minuth has traveled the 165-mile length of the 20th Congressional District many times, talking to citizens along the way.

Although the main thrust of his campaign is health care reform, Minuth said he has discovered that education and jobs are what really matter to the people of the 20th District, which stretches from Fresno to Bakersfield.

According to the Fresno doctor, people are "seething" about the state of education in their communities. Students can't spell and they can't write, said Minuth.

"We are creating a permanent underclass," he warned, adding, "The mission of a school is to educate and the second is to educate well."

Minuth, a Republican who wants to unseat Democrat Cal Dooley, a six-term incumbent, laid out his platform recently in a meeting with the editors of Pulitzer newspapers in Fresno and Kings counties.

A doctor serving the San Joaquin Valley for 27 years, Minuth is a kidney specialist and has discovered on the campaign trail that many people know him as someone who treated a relative.

Minuth has a plan for health care reform, but he also has a prescription of education reform. Despite the fact that the federal government has limited influence over local schools, one of the reforms Minuth would support is choice. He believes that parents should have a right to send their children to the school of their choice.

Minuth's nine-point plan for health care and medical services includes freedom of access to doctors and treatment, regulatory relief, a safety net for the uninsured and a diversity of providers that would create competition. He also advocates full financial disclosure to patients, saying that patients should not be charged for costs such as advertising, bureaucracy and uncompensated care of others.

As far as employment, Minuth hopes to improve what he refers to as California's "unfriendly" business climate. "It is a very unfriendly place," he said. Employers are facing increased workers compensation fees, he said, in addition to paying rising taxes and electricity costs.

A native of Riga, Latvia, Minuth grew up in war-torn Eastern Europe. According to the biography printed in his campaign literature, his family escaped through Poland and Czechoslovakia. His parents settled in West Germany after World War II, and it was there that Minuth attended medical school. He later came to America with his family, served in the U.S. Army and became a U.S. citizen. He has practiced medicine in Fresno since 1975, when he founded the Fresno Nephrology Medical Group.

Because of his background, Minuth does not take national security for granted. Homeland security would be high on his priorities if he is elected to Congress, he said.

The 67-year-old Minuth is also a firm believer in term limits. He states unequivocally that, if elected, he will serve no more than eight years. "Eight years is enough and then I have some books to write," he said with a smile.

Minuth talked about the "incredible arrogance of incumbents," saying, "It's time for a new look."

According to Minuth, the Congress has not been a good steward of Social Security and he complains that the record of the California legislature is "dismal."

Minuth supports continuation of the nation's train system, Amtrak, and has used the train for much of his campaign travel. He supports a high-speed rail system for California and says that trains are important both for homeland security and as a way to reduce pollution.