Air District announces funds for replacement grants

The Business Journal, Wed. April 11, 2012

The local air district has announced grant funding for programs helping businesses replace their heavy-duty trucks and locomotives with newer, cleaner ones.

The application period opened this week for $2 million in total funding to replace line-haul, medium horsepower or switch locomotives.

With applications accepted until May 25, the money will go to railroads that operate individual switch locomotives, MHP locomotives or intrastate line haul locomotives at least 50 percent of the time within the Air District's eight-county boundaries.

While a typical older locomotive emits about seven tons of nitrogen oxides per year, a new locomotive with clean burning technology can reduce those emissions by 91 percent.

Funds are provided through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Diesel Emission Reduction Act.

A new grant program offered through the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District will help truck operators purchase newer trucks with applications being accepted beginning April 16.

The Heavy Duty Truck Vouncher program will cover up to 25 percent of the price of a new truck for a maximum of $40,000 if the truck meets 2007 emissions standards while those meeting 2010 emissions standards will be covered for up to 35 percent to a maximum of $50,000. Engine retrofits reducing nitrogen oxygen and particulate matter can be covered with up to $10,000 each.

Eligible businesses are those with trucks model year 2002 or older. They must also operate within California at least 75 percent of the time and within the Air District boundaries at least 50 percent of the time.

Truck dealerships will be working with the Air District to offset the cost of new trucks and will also assist companies with the application process. They will also be responsible for delivering old vehicles to dismantlers.

Information and applications for the Air District's grant programs can be found on their website or by calling (559) 230-6000.

Approval for California high-speed rail plan?

By Tim Sheehan
Modesto Bee, Thurs., April 12, 2012

High-speed rail officials are expected today to approve a business plan that details how they hope to pay for a proposed passenger train line between San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority board will meet in San Francisco to hear testimony about the 212-page plan — a revised blueprint of expected costs for construction and operation, as well as anticipated revenue and ridership.

The business plan will be closely scrutinized by California legislators, who are being asked to OK about $2.7 billion in bonds to help pay for the initial construction in the San Joaquin Valley.

A November version of the plan estimated the cost of building a dedicated 520-mile system of tracks from San Francisco to Anaheim — to be used only by high-speed trains — at more than $98 billion.

The revised plan calls for a "blended" network in which existing and upgraded commuter rail lines in the Bay Area and Los Angeles Basin would share their tracks with the high-speed trains. That program reduces the miles of dedicated high-speed-only tracks by about 110 miles — a change that authority officials say will cut about $30 billion. The cost of the blended system is pegged at $68.4 billion.

Also new is an effort to ditch the "train to nowhere" label critics applied to the first $6 billion stretch of construction from Madera to Bakersfield.

Now, the authority hopes to extend construction in continuous phases north to Merced and south across the Tehachapi Mountains to Palmdale and on into the San Fernando Valley within 10 years.

That would form a $31 billion, 300-mile "initial operating segment" on which the first 220-mph trains would carry passengers starting in 2022.

"It's not just about building a high-speed train," authority Chairman Dan Richard has said. "We're using the high-speed rail program as the driver for a strategic investment across the board in our transportation infrastructure."

Among other benefits, Richard said, are taking passenger traffic off of freight tracks, improving freight capacity. And, by continuing high-speed rail across the Tehachapi range, a passenger rail gap that exists between the valley and Southern California will be closed.

As in previous versions of the business plan, the rail authority expects the federal government — which has ponied up about $3.3 billion to start construction in the Central Valley — to contribute about $20 billion more in the coming decade.

As Republicans in Congress fight against putting more money toward high-speed rail, Gov. Jerry Brown and the state Department of Finance have proposed using money from California's new cap-and-trade program as a backstop if other funding sources fall short.

Cap-and-trade money comes from the sale of air pollution credits to industries that are unable to meet pollution-reduction goals. Brown's 2012-13 budget suggests that the program could generate $1 billion or more next year.

A major question continues to be: If the system is built, can it attract enough riders for it to break even or make a profit? Proposition 1A, the $9 billion bond measure approved by California voters in 2008, prohibits any operating subsidy for the high-speed system.

Ridership estimates in the revised business plan suggest that even under unfavorable conditions high-speed trains could sell about 5.8 million tickets a year in 2025 on a Merced-to-San Fernando line.

Higher airfares, more expensive gas and other factors could drive ridership in 2025 to as many as 10.5 million.