

SoCal high-speed rail presentations go on

By Jim Skeen, Antelope Valley Press
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LANCASTER - High-speed rail will bring capacity to a congested transportation system and will spur economic development, especially around its proposed stations, including Palmdale.

That is what members of the Antelope Valley Board of Trade were told during a presentation Tuesday by Michelle Boehm, Southern California Regional Director for the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

The presentation was one in a series of public outreach meetings taking place this month on the system that backers says will run from San Francisco to Los Angeles by 2029.

The system is proposed eventually to extend to Sacramento and San Diego, totaling 800 miles with up to 24 stations.

Construction on the first 29 miles of the system began in January. So far the work has involved grading and relocation of utility lines. This summer, construction will begin on a bridge over the Fresno River.

"That will be the first sign of the high-speed rail," Boehm said.

The alignments for the two portions of the system going through the Antelope Valley are not yet nailed down. From Bakersfield, the track will head over the Tehachapi Mountains. From there into the northern end of Lancaster still needs to be determined. The authority wants to avoid wind energy and mining activities in east Kern County, Boehm said.

Going through Lancaster and Palmdale along Sierra Highway, the project will need to work on several grade separation projects, Boehm said. There will also need to be some reconfiguration of the Palmdale Transportation Center, which is south of Technology Drive and west of Sierra Highway.

"Going south of here is the most complex piece of the high-speed rail system," Boehm said of the Palmdale to Burbank segment. "We've got to find a way to get through the geographical challenges and then we're getting into the densest urban core that we offer here in California."

There are four major routes, plus a couple of subroutes, being looked at between Palmdale and Burbank. The original proposals paralleled the Antelope Valley Freeway between Acton and Santa Clarita, but new alternatives include underground routes proposed to tunnel through the San Gabriel Mountains with the aim of avoiding opponents in the Acton area and the Santa Clarita Valley.

Boehm said a report on those alternatives will be presented to the authority's board in June. From there, the next step would be to start the environmental impact studies. That process, in which a preferred route will emerge, will take about two years to complete.

Critics of the high-speed rail question its need and point to its escalating price tag, now estimated at \$68.5 billion, and the disruption to communities it would cross. The project's critics include House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, and Central Valley farmers who are litigating right-of-way issues.

Much of Boehm's presentation was spent on making the case for the system, citing economic and social benefits.

The state's freeways, airways and rail lines are congested, Boehm said. That situation will get worse as California's population grows.

"There will be 12 million more people living in California in the next couple of decades. That's the equivalent of going over to Ohio and asking all of them to move to California," she said.

In previous presentations, rail authority representatives said to provide the equivalent new capacity on the state's highways and airports would cost more than double the investment required to develop a high-speed rail system between San Francisco and Los Angeles. If it was even possible, that would mean building 4,300 new highway lane miles, 115 additional airport gates, and four new airport runways at an estimated cost of \$158 billion.

The rail authority estimates that by 2040, the system will reduce vehicle miles of travel by almost 10 million every day. Over a 58-year period of operation, it would reduce vehicle miles by over 400 billion.

"In areas down the hill, we have very, very poor air quality. If we're able to take people off our existing highways and put them on trains we can start to address our air quality issues," Boehm said.

The system would bring great economic benefits, she said. In looking at high-speed rail systems in other countries, stations themselves become economic engines.

"You can attract retail, you can attract business, you can attract education," Boehm said. "You can attract whatever you want to attract to the Antelope Valley."

Enhanced transportation will help attract youth to communities with stations.

"Millennials pick where they want to live and then they get a job," Boehm said. "Millennials are going to pick a place to live based on characteristics that are important to them and one of those characteristics is mobility and access to transit."

Boehm said the system will help spur innovation, allowing for quick face-to-face meetings and connecting segments of the state in ways previously not possible.

Boehm also cited studies showing access to transportation is a key factor in lifting people out of poverty.

Community meetings to explain the route alternatives under consideration between Palmdale and Burbank are scheduled for 5 to 8 p.m. Tuesday at the Larry Chimbole Cultural Center, 38350 Sierra Highway and Palmdale, and 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. June 6 at High Desert School, 3620 Antelope Woods Road in Acton.

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