

# Investing in California Small Businesses

SMALL BUSINESS NEWSLETTER • Volume 13: Issue 04

FALL 2025



## *Small Business Program*

The Authority is committed to small businesses playing a major role in building the statewide high-speed rail system.

**SMALL BUSINESS NEWSLETTER**  
**VOLUME 13 • ISSUE 04**  
**FALL 2025**

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To access and download more information pertaining to the small business program, visit the Small Business Resources webpage at <https://hsr.ca.gov/small-business/>

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To view past newsletters visit:

<https://hsr.ca.gov/business-opportunities/small-business-program/small-business-newsletter/>

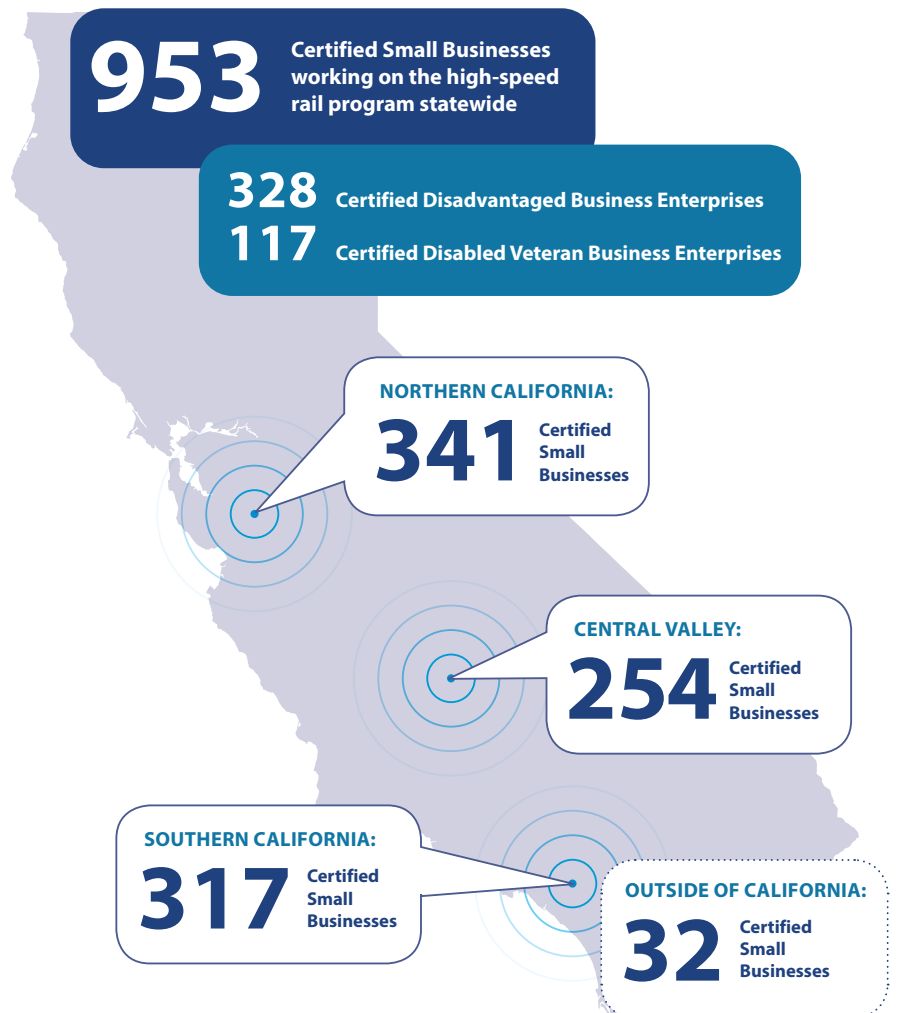
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### SMALL BUSINESS PARTICIPATION

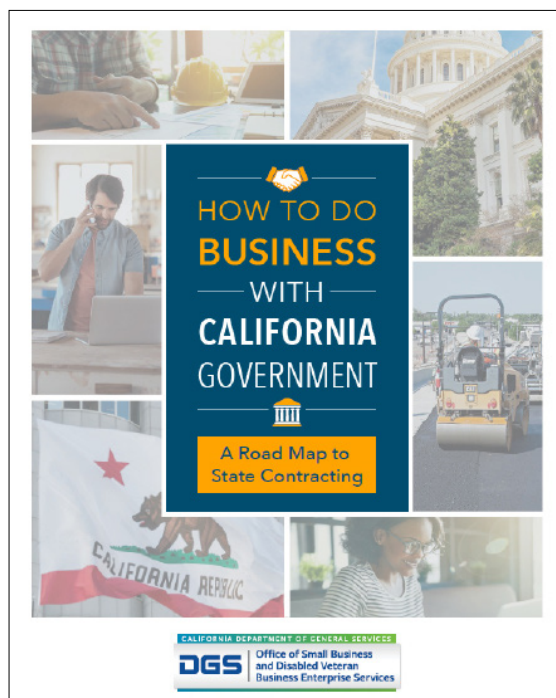
as of August 30, 2025





# How to Do Business with the State of California

Visit these resources for education, training, and support for growing a thriving business, doing business with the state of California, and connecting with the High-Speed Rail Authority.



# Norma's Notes



Norma Curiel, Small Business Advocate

As you may have read in the last issue of the Small Business Newsletter, I recently joined the California High-Speed Rail Authority (Authority) as the new Small Business Advocate! I'm very excited to join the Authority during this exciting time of progress and innovation to connect small businesses with contracting opportunities, meet our participation goals, and deliver up-to-date information on how small businesses can do business with the state. Supporting small businesses is a true passion of mine, rooted in my upbringing in the Chico area where my family harvested olives for over 40 years, in the farming and agricultural community.

I have experience working in both the public and private sectors, with much of my career focused on the banking industry, where I spent 15 years, and civil state services. I previously worked on small business-related issues at the California Department of General Services (DGS) Office of Small Business and Disabled Veteran Business Enterprise Services (OSDS), as a Certification Manager and Staff Trainer. I had the opportunity to write regulations and policies for the entire state on small business and Disabled Veteran Business Enterprise (DVBE) certification eligibility and participation. Before that, I also was a Certification

Officer at DGS where I reviewed certification applications for eligibility and participated in certification workshops. Additionally, I worked as the Administrative Director for the Disabled Veteran Business Alliance, a non-profit organization that assisted DVBE's with contracting with the state, provided contracting opportunities, and facilitated matchmaking with state agencies, state reciprocity partners, and prime contractors.

All of this is to say, I'm no stranger to working with small businesses and the issues they face. I'm eager to come full circle from policy, certification, and nonprofit assistance to now work with small businesses directly, through outreach efforts, in contracting and compliance at a state agency.

Speaking of working with small businesses directly, I had the opportunity to attend and participate in the Authority's Annual Small Business Diversity and Resources Fair in Burlingame on October 22, where over 300 small businesses networked with exhibitors and participated in a workshop on the state procurement process. At this event, small businesses were able to meet face-to-face with prime contractors on current and upcoming opportunities in over 200 matchmaking appointments. It was an amazing, informative event. You can read what some of the attendees had to say about the event and this project on page 8. You can also learn more about this event from our [news release](#).

On September 17, CEO Ian Choudri attended the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC) Los Angeles County Chapter's 2025 Achievement Awards Banquet to accept the Champion of Small Business Award on behalf of the Authority. This award recognized the Authority's efforts in supporting small businesses and making sure they play an important role in building this historic project. Thank you to the ACEC LA Chapter for this recognition!

It is also important to note that, in early September, California leaders approved an agreement to reauthorize





The Authority's Small Business Diversity and Resources Fair offered attendees the opportunity to create new connections through tabling and matchmaking sessions.

the Cap-and-Invest program, securing \$1 billion for the project annually through 2045. This is the largest guaranteed infusion of funding for the program to date. This funding stream will be crucial to continuing construction in the Central Valley and initiating procurements that provide opportunities to industry in support of that work. [You can read more about this reauthorization and funding in our news release.](#)

Finally, I would like to share recent developments at the federal level that have immediately changed the Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) Program. On October 3, the U.S. Department of Transportation issued an [Interim Final Rule \(IFR\)](#) that requires reevaluation of all currently certified DBEs by applicable Unified Certification

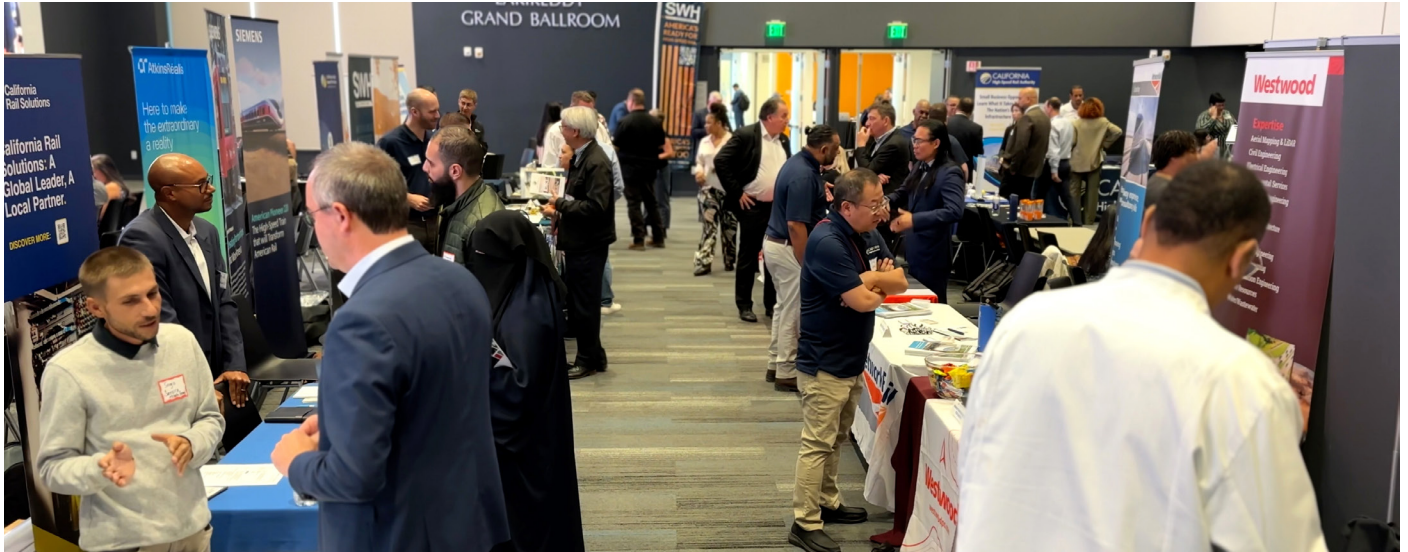
Programs (UCPs). Until UCP reevaluations are complete, the IFR requires federal grant recipients to pause enforcement of DBE goals in existing contracts supported by federal funds, among other requirements.

Accordingly, until further notice, the Authority will pause enforcement of DBE goals in existing contracts. This IFR does not change or alter the Authority's other business participation or civil rights programs such as the Authority's Small Business (SB) goals, DVBE goals, and our federal Title VI civil rights requirements. Both SB and DVBE goals remain unchanged and in effect in Authority contracts.

We are currently reviewing the IFR to identify other necessary program and procedural changes to ensure full compliance. Updates will be shared on our [Small Business Program webpage](#), or via notice, as they become available. The Authority remains committed to supporting and encouraging disadvantaged and small business participation in its contracting, and we value your input in how we continue to do so. If you have any additional questions, please contact the Small Business Program at [sbprogram@hsr.ca.gov](mailto:sbprogram@hsr.ca.gov).

I look forward to working with the small business community and keeping you up to date on the latest opportunities and happenings on California's high-speed rail project.

# Small Business Events



Tables at the Small Business Forum provided a place for industry to learn more about potential business opportunities and network.



Matchmaking sessions between small businesses and prime contractors create connections that support industry and high-speed rail.

November 12 to Wednesday, November 13, 2025  
**Veterans in Business (VIB) National Conference**  
9 a.m. to 9 p.m.



# Did You Know?



## Frequently Asked Questions from Small Businesses

**Question:** How do I stay informed on the status of the project?

**Answer:** The Authority's BuildHSR website provides up-to-date information on the project. The website provides updates on active construction sites, current road closures and detours in construction zones, as well as an overview of the small business participation numbers. For more information, visit <https://buildhsr.com/>.

## Business Advisory Council Profiles



Tak Allen, President, CRE Pathways

As the President of CRE Pathways and one of the California High-Speed Rail Authority Business Advisory Council (BAC) Primary Representatives, Tak Allen remains a champion for underserved communities and underutilized small businesses. In a world where opportunity depends on both what you know and who you know, CRE Pathways ensures marginalized communities are not left behind. CRE Pathways is a BPPE-exempt vocational institution committed to advancing economic mobility by building innovative, community-rooted workforce pipelines.

Since 2006, CRE Pathways has equipped marginalized youth and adults with the skills, exposure, and support needed to access high-demand, high-quality careers through non-traditional education, paid fellowships, and hands-on training. As the home of Sacramento's only Fellowship Pipeline directly linking underrepresented talent to public service and industry roles, CRE Pathways bridges the gap between potential and opportunity — one pathway at a time.

One of CRE Pathways' programs, D.R.I.V.E. Resources, is dedicated to closing economic and achievement gaps through a comprehensive one stop resource hub that provides wrap-around supports to families. CRE Pathways is committed to making resources easily accessible by establishing resource and counseling centers within underserved communities. As such, community members have equitable, ongoing access to the tools and support needed to get their lives back on track.

Through its programming, CRE Pathways aims to build nationwide networks of resources that support collaborations between underserved communities, emerging and existing businesses, and grassroots organizations and advocacy groups. Through its support network and vocational programs, CRE Pathways empowers individuals with skills to grow strong businesses, succeed in local job markets, and drive sustainable economic change in their communities.



CRE Pathways works to effectively build nationwide networks of resources that support collaborations between underserved communities, emerging and existing businesses, and grassroots organizations and advocacy groups.



# How to Build California History by Thinking Small



At the Small Business Diversity and Resources Fair, over 300 attendees were able to meet face-to-face with prime contractors to network and find opportunities.

A crowd of eager small business owners gathered near a door at the Burlingame Community Center. An event organizer called out, letting the crowd know they had five minutes to meet with vendors. The door swung open and everybody scurried — professionally — to make a match at the Authority's version of speed dating.

The annual Small Business Diversity and Resources Fair on October 22 drew more than 300 small businesses excited to find work and be a part of history. Business owners received tutorials on how to participate in the high-speed rail project, made connections during matchmaking programming, and learned how they can help build the future of transportation.

Emily Morrison, the Authority's Chief of Contracting, smiled as she watched the crowd. This is exactly the type of excitement the Authority hopes to build on as it delivers high-speed rail to California.

"High-speed rail cannot happen without small businesses," Morrison said. "We need that community to be active participants in this to make it a reality. They're part of the history in the making."

Jennifer Zamora was looking to make a little history of her own at the event. Zamora is the CEO of [Omnia Associates](#), a brand-new communications firm with a deep history of working on public transportation. Zamora, a bilingual translator, did community outreach and engagement for the Caltrain electrification project and has already done some work for high-speed rail.

Chatting with strangers is something of a specialty for Zamora—she helpfully asked an Authority camera crew if they needed to do an interview with her. She was excited to potentially play a part in the high-speed rail project.

"High-speed rail is one of our prime goals to get onto," Zamora said. "As a native Californian, I want to travel down to my mom's house in Southern California without getting on the five and driving for eight hours. We want to be part of a transportation service that is a community service and environmentally better than the other options."

She looked around. "It's exciting to be in a room full of people that are change agents. We're stepping up into our rights and getting some awesome transportation."

One of those change agents could be Robert Runyan II, the owner of [Family and Friends](#) construction in the Central Valley. He smiled as he talked about riding high-speed rail in Italy. As a general contractor who lives in Turlock, he's ready to do whatever it takes to help finish the project.



At the fair, 40 exhibitors were able to discuss their needs with small businesses, opening the door to potential partnerships.

"(Our role would be) on the finish work side. That's what I enjoy," he said. "I make the joke that if I could hang doors the rest of my life, I'd be a happy man. We handle everything in-house. We can build a whole building if we need to, but we just want to be part of something like this and grow our business."

For Runyan, it's also about legacy. High-speed trains will eventually run by Turlock on their way to Modesto and Sacramento to the north. Connecting the Central Valley to San Francisco and Los Angeles is literally history in the making.

"There's no reason I can't ride high-speed rail in Turlock," he said. "I can't wait to tell my kids or grandkids I helped build that."

# Stronger Together: How SBDN Can Help Lead Your Small Business to Success



SBDN Procon Procurement Conference, September 2025

We connected with Jay Ungos, President and Founder of the [Small Business Diversity Network \(SBDN\)](#), to learn how small businesses can utilize SBDN to help navigate contracting opportunities including those with California High-Speed Rail.

## Q: What does SBDN do and what is your role?

Since its inception, SBDN has been dedicated to empowering small businesses and entrepreneurs by providing the training, resources, access to opportunities, and impactful events they need to thrive.

SBDN's approach involves working with regional leaders and key stakeholders across industries to support the growth of the small business community. My role oversees the strategic direction of SBDN, facilitates partnerships with public and private sector organizations, and ensures that small and diverse businesses have the resources and connections they need to successfully compete for opportunities — including major infrastructure projects like the California high-speed rail project.

## Q: Why should small businesses utilize SBDN? How can SBDN help small businesses?

Small businesses face unique challenges in accessing opportunities, particularly when it comes to major projects and contracts. SBDN serves as a bridge, connecting small

businesses with the resources, training, and networks they need to compete effectively and grow sustainably. We provide:

- **Access to opportunities:** *Connecting small businesses with contracting opportunities like California High-Speed Rail.*
- **Training and capacity building:** *Equipping businesses with the skills and knowledge needed to successfully bid on and execute contracts.*
- **Networking and partnerships:** *Facilitating collaboration with regional leaders and key stakeholders across sectors and industries.*
- **Resource connection:** *Linking businesses to the tools, information, and support services essential for growth.*
- **Community support:** *Creating a collaborative environment where businesses are "Stronger Together."*

## Q: What are the key steps small businesses should take to prepare for working with SBDN?

Before engaging with SBDN, it's helpful to:

- *Have a clear understanding of your business capabilities and goals.*
- *Ensure your certifications (such as SBE, DBE, MBE, WBE, or DVBE) are current.*
- *Prepare your documentation and capability statements.*
- *Come ready to actively participate and build relationships within the SBDN community.*



Jay Ungos, President and Founder of the Small Business Diversity Network (SBDN)





SBDN Recon Live Resource Conference, May 2025

To begin your journey with SBDN:

- **Sign up as a free member:** Access our network, resources, and information about upcoming opportunities and events.
- **Come to our monthly events:** Network with other small business owners, meet potential partners, learn about contracting opportunities, and connect with regional leaders and stakeholders across various industries.
- **Attend our signature conferences:** Provide comprehensive training, access to major opportunities like the California high-speed rail project, and direct connections with decision-makers and prime contractors.

**Q: How can small businesses connect with SBDN?**

For more information on programs, upcoming events, and membership opportunities, scan the QR code or visit [www.sbdn.info](http://www.sbdn.info).

- Text "SBDN" to 866.756.7236 to connect with our team and receive information about opportunities and events.
- Email us directly at [hello@sbdn.info](mailto:hello@sbdn.info).

We encourage small businesses to connect with us today to start accessing the training, resources, networking opportunities, and connections that can help take your business to the next level. Whether you're just starting out or looking to expand into new opportunities, SBDN is here to support you.

SBDN brings together businesses and stakeholders because we are "Stronger Together." The key is to take that first step — sign up, show up, and engage with the community dedicated to your success!





# From Deck Hand to Officer to Entrepreneur: The Journey of Veteran Walter Allen



Walter Allen, Founder and CEO, Acumen Building Enterprise

**W**alter Allen laughs when he remembers his first job as a deck hand in the United States Navy. “I was painting and chipping paint. Then painting some more. All day long,” he recalls.

Allen was stationed aboard the naval frigate USS Jesse L. Brown (FF-1089). As a seaman’s recruit, he was responsible for maintenance as the vessel sailed across the Atlantic and throughout the Mediterranean.

Allen had entered the service a few months earlier, when he was just 17 years old. His dad dropped him off for basic training at Naval Station Great Lakes, near Chicago, with a tear in his eye.

Allen’s maiden voyage was long. He had no idea how far his journey would take him both professionally and personally. Now, Allen has built a career offering systems engineering solutions and infrastructure management to modern transit systems, including the California high-speed rail project.

Allen’s professional path steered him from deck hand to business leader. He learned his ship “from the bolts up” and set to work learning more. He earned a Naval Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (NROTC) scholarship, a college degree, and then a commission as an officer. Allen eventually chose to return to civilian life and earn a master’s degree in civil engineering from University of California, Berkeley.

Allen founded his engineering company, [Acumen Building Enterprise](#), while still a student at Cal. Acumen was a quick success, and in the decades since has supplied professional engineering services to transit systems and complex infrastructure projects around the world. The firm operates with a multidisciplinary focus on systems engineering, program management, and mobility as a service. Based in Oakland, the veteran-owned Certified Small Business has offices tucked between the Oakland Estuary and the Oakland Coliseum.

Working on a high-speed rail project “was always a dream,” Allen says, because of his belief in green, efficient transportation and reducing CO2 emissions. That dream is coming true today, with Acumen consulting with prime contractors DB ECO and Systra/TYPSA, to support operations planning and overhead catenary systems development. Allen also served as a member of the Authority’s Business Advisory Council, encouraging the participation of other small businesses.



Walter Allen graduated with honors from Navy basic training.

Allen has come just as far on his personal journey. He is deeply inspired by contemporary art, with a collection of paintings that spills across his suite of offices and throughout his home. That art is how he marks his life memories.

“Cuba, Africa, India, Mexico — art is a way to make sense of the world,” he explains. “There’s a whole world out there just trying to survive. It’s the people and their struggles that I think about when I look at the art.” Allen devotes his free time to serving as a board member for the Brandywine Workshop and Archives, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that promotes fine art and global culture.

Allen’s service in the U.S. Navy launched him on a professional and personal travel journey that made him the man he is today. Professionally, he became a business leader and an important contributor to California’s transportation future. Personally, he developed expertise in his passions of art and culture. He has taken the journey of a lifetime — and he’s not finished yet.

Shum Preston



# Wagner Engineering: Changing the Game for Transportation and Construction



Stephanie Wagner, Founder and President, Wagner Engineering and Survey

Stephanie Wagner gets emphatic when you ask about the importance of mass transit and high-speed rail. Public transportation is vital for growth. She knows that better than anybody: Metro was her company's first customer, 35 years ago.

[Wagner Engineering and Survey](#), which is based in Northridge, has seen both its clients list and Southern California mass transit come a long way since 1990. The woman-owned business has worked on the California High-Speed Rail Project since 2009, when it was a boon for the company during the Great Recession.

As Wagner prepared her home to host the annual Oct. 31 company anniversary celebration, she reflected on how the Los Angeles transportation system has evolved — and how high-speed rail will be a critical link in the system.

"I think it's a game changer. I really do," she said. "Not just for transportation, but also what it's going to do for the whole area along the transit line. I really believe that. I see growth happening and it's exciting."

Wagner moved to the Los Angeles area in 1984 after a magical visit to the Hollywood Bowl convinced her to leave her home state of Louisiana, where she'd earned both a bachelor's and master's degree in civil engineering.

She immediately put her expertise to work. She moved and got a job in one day after spotting a listing in the Los Angeles Times. While she enjoyed working on large projects, it became apparent she should strike out on her own. The construction industry is still dominated by men, but in the 1980s it was particularly difficult to be a woman in a male-dominated field.

"I found in certain companies, the men were pooh-poohing the women," she said. "I'm a [Ragin'-Cajun girl](#), and I'm not going to take that. I had to give myself a chance."

The chance paid out. Wagner Engineering started in the San Fernando Valley and landed its first client, LA Metro. Wagner and her team set to work laying out the course for subway lines, and the work continues today, as Wagner Engineering works to complete work on the Purple Line, which will eventually extend from Westwood to downtown LA.

Wagner has seen her company grow along with the transit system. She added staff and projects. The company now provides civil engineering, stormwater design, and compliance, right-of-way engineering and aerial mapping, in addition to surveying work. Wagner Engineering worked on LA's iconic [Sixth Street Bridge](#), which has won worldwide acclaim for its design.





A MetroLink train passes under a bridge on a line serviced by Wagner Engineering and Survey.

Wagner's efforts were honored in 2014 when she was nominated for a *San Fernando Valley Business Journal* award for women in business.

Growing along with the system has been the Southern California mass transit infrastructure. Next, people choose to leave their cars at home because mass transit is more convenient. Wagner's already had glimpses of that — she cites her 27-year-old son, who, along with his friends, is adamant about riding bikes and taking public transit.

Wagner gets excited when she talks about taking a shuttle bus to the Hollywood Bowl, where she fell in love with Southern California 40 years ago. But she also gets excited about what's coming next for towns like Fresno, Bakersfield, and Merced, as high-speed rail will open a world of possibilities to the Central Valley.

"It's a lifeline for those towns," she said. "And that's what I'm talking about. The ability to take a beautiful train and get to San Francisco fast. It's happening."

Jim Patrick







# AVENUE 17 AND HANFORD ARMONA ROAD GRADE SEPARATIONS

LATEST VIDEOS: [WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/CAHIGHSPEEDRAIL](http://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/CAHIGHSPEEDRAIL)



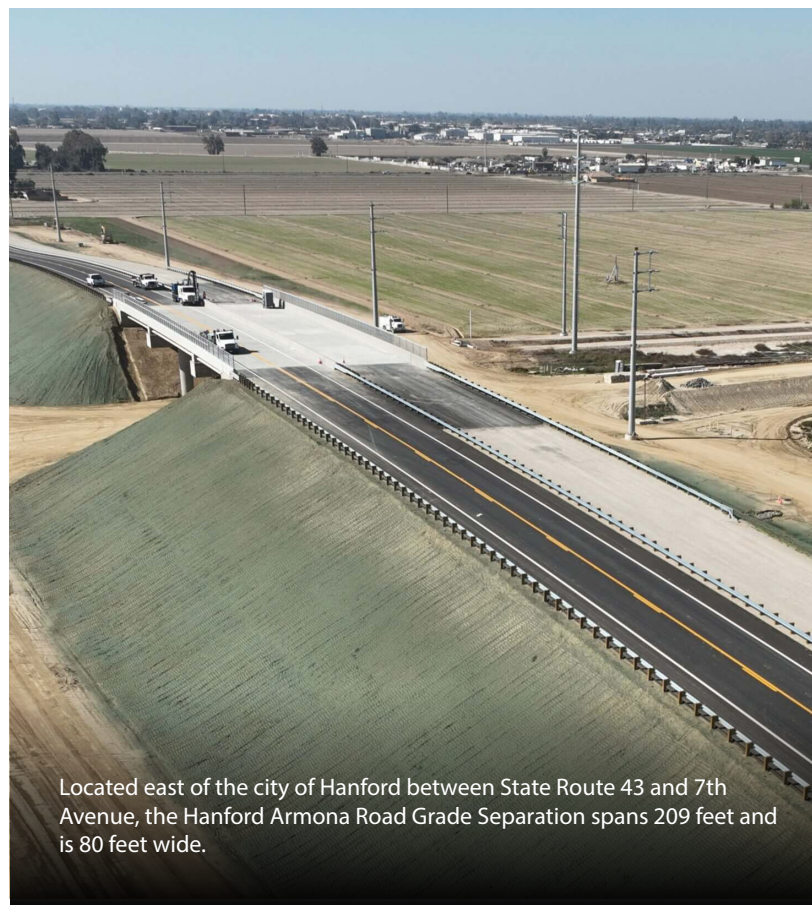
On October 30, the Authority announced the completion of the Avenue 17 Grade Separation in Madera County, the eighth structure to be completed this year.



Located between Lake Street and Raymond Road, the Avenue 17 grade separation spans 614 feet and is more than 43 feet wide.



On October 31, the Authority announced the completion of the Hanford Armona Road Grade Separation in Kings County, the ninth structure to be completed this year.



Located east of the city of Hanford between State Route 43 and 7th Avenue, the Hanford Armona Road Grade Separation spans 209 feet and is 80 feet wide.