

Investing in California Small Businesses

SMALL BUSINESS NEWSLETTER • Volume 14: Issue 01

MARCH 2026



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
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RAIL AUTHORITY**

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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/>

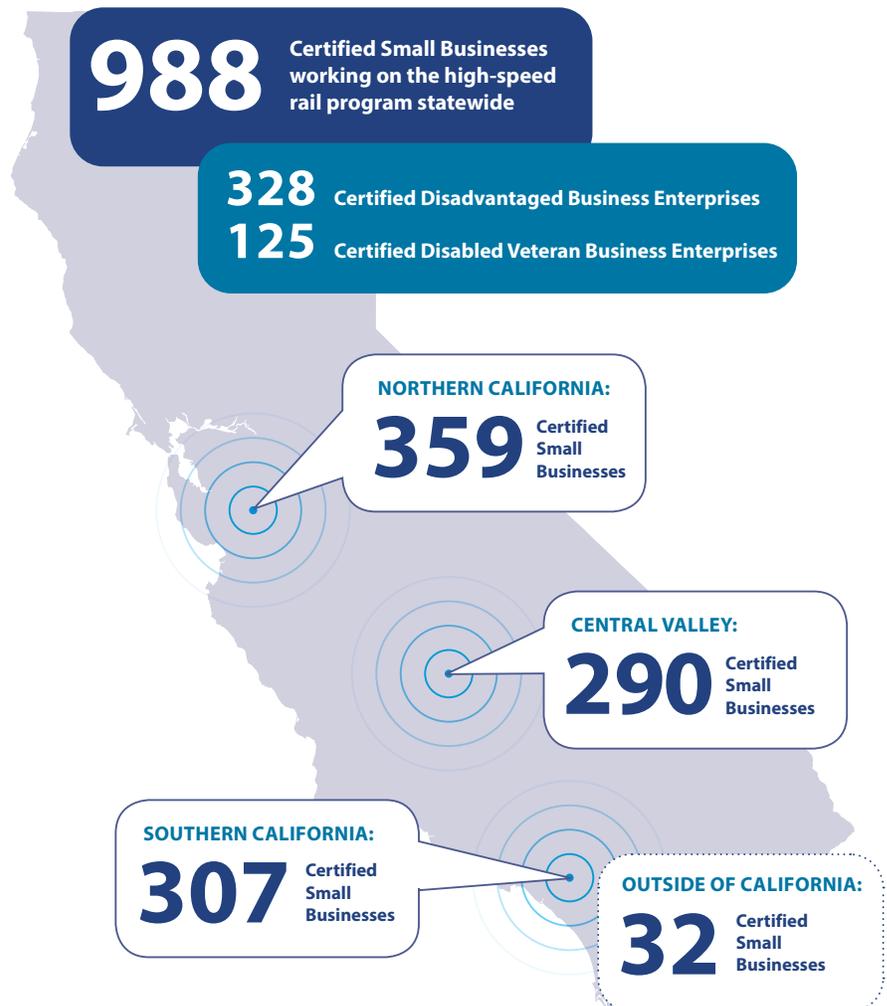
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SMALL BUSINESS PARTICIPATION

as of January 31, 2026



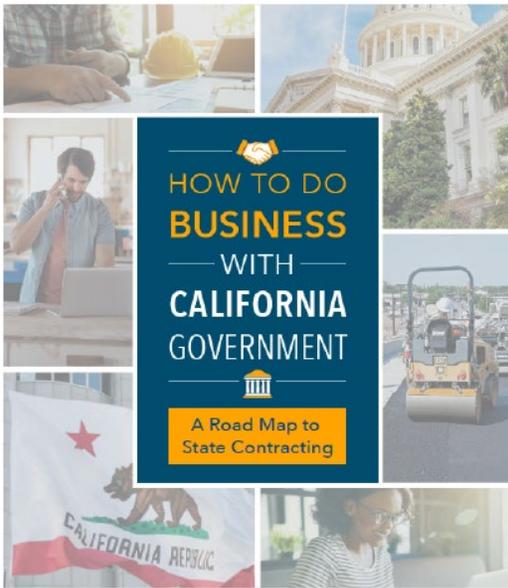
How to Do Business with the State of California

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.



Connect with High-Speed Rail

Register your business at www.ConnectHSR.com

HOW TO DO BUSINESS WITH CALIFORNIA GOVERNMENT

A Road Map to State Contracting

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL SERVICES
DGS Office of Small Business and Disabled Veteran Business Enterprise Services

AMERICA'S SBDC CALIFORNIA

There are 56 Small Business Development Centers in California, working to help small businesses

www.californiasbdc.org

We help entrepreneurs start, grow or successfully exit businesses through mentoring and education.

www.score.org

SCORE

FOR THE LIFE OF YOUR BUSINESS

APEX ACCELERATORS

www.apexaccelerators.us/#/



APEX Accelerators provide education and training to ensure that all businesses become capable of participating in federal, state, and local government contracts.

Norma's Notes



Norma Curiel, Small Business Advocate

2026 is a critical year for procurements here at the California High-Speed Rail Authority (Authority), and we'll need the support of the small business community to meet our goals. To prepare, we've been busy hosting events to build networking connections and find opportunities to collaborate with industry.

Tomorrow, March 25, we'll be hosting the Tracks to Opportunity Network Summit at the Convention Center in Pasadena. This summit will feature workshops on available financial resources, interactive resource partner exhibitors, Primes seeking teaming opportunities with small businesses, and dynamic networking designed to spark new ideas and meaningful connections. Additionally, the event will feature an [Indefinite Delivery Indefinite Quantity \(IDIQ\)](#) workshop – a contract structure that establishes a pool of pre-qualified firms and delivers work through individual task orders — led by Chief of Contracting Emily Morrison. This session will explain how the IDIQ process works, how businesses can participate, and upcoming procurement opportunities and schedules, and will include time for questions.

In February, we hosted a Clean Energy Symposium in San Francisco to continue the conversation on refining the Authority's clean energy and energy storage systems after



Authority CEO Ian Choudri presents to attendees on the details of the Clean Energy Delivery Program procurement.

releasing a [Request for Expressions of Interest \(RFEI\) for the Clean Energy Delivery Program](#). Fifty attendees heard from CEO Ian Choudri, state officials, and international representatives on California's energy policies and regulatory framework, the various business incentives available for clean energy firms, and international examples of rail systems harnessing clean energy to power their systems.



Authority staff members register attendees at the entrance to the Clean Energy Symposium.



Attendees heard from Authority leaders Ian Choudri, Chief of Contracting Emily Morrison, and Chief of Planning and Engineering Soon-Sik Lee on the Clean Energy Delivery Program procurement, state policies, and business incentives for firms.

We also hosted a Pre-Bid Virtual Conference for the [Co-Development Agreement \(CDA\) Request for Qualifications \(RFQ\)](#) on January 6, an in-person Pre-Bid Conference and Small Business Workshop on the [Track & Systems Construction Contract \(TSCC\) Requests for Proposals \(RFP\)](#) in Sacramento on December 19, and an in-person Pre-Bid Conference and Small Business Workshop on the [Fresno Station Early Works Invitation to Bid](#) in Fresno on December 18. Attendees to these events heard from Authority leaders like Emily Morrison, Assistant Chief of Small Business Chardená Valley, and others on the scopes of work, procurement timelines, and what we're looking for from industry.

As we look further into 2026, we can expect more progress on these procurements and others, including:

- *Awarding and onboarding the Co-Development Partnership*
- *Awarding the Track and Systems Construction Contract*

- *Releasing the Design-Build Procurement of Operations Control Center*
- *Releasing the Design-Build Procurement of Maintenance Facility*
- *Moving forward on the Merced Civil Work Design-Build contract*
- *Awarding the Design-Build contract for Fresno Station*
- *Releasing an RFEI for tunnels*

With so many upcoming procurements, make sure your business information is current in our [ConnectHSR vendor registry](#) so you can get your business out there and be kept up to date on developments as they occur.

Finally, I want to briefly talk about the [U.S. Department of Transportation's Interim Final Rule \(IFR\)](#), mentioned in my [inaugural column](#) as the Authority's Small Business Advocate, that immediately changed the Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) Program. We have not received any new guidance since the IFR's release from the federal government, but we are continuing to monitor for more information. Updates will be shared on our [Small Business Program webpage](#) or via notice as they become available. As always, if you have any additional questions about the IFR or any other topic, please contact the Small Business Program at sbprogram@hsr.ca.gov.

With all these exciting opportunities for small businesses to work on this historic project, I hope to see many of you as we crisscross the state for our upcoming small business events.



During the Clean Energy Symposium, attendees were able to network with fellow industry professionals and Authority staff.

Small Business Events



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



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

March 25, 2026

[Tracks to Opportunity Networking Summit](#)

10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Pasadena Convention Center

300 E Green St.

Pasadena, CA 91101

April 23, 2026

[What's Next Series: Indirect Cost](#)

10 a.m. to 11 a.m.

Online/Virtual

Did You Know?



Frequently Asked Questions from Small Businesses

Question: How do I stay informed about Primes' needs (i.e., Bid requests)?

Answer: The Authority hosts pre-bid conferences and industry forums. These public forums highlight the proposed work outlined in a specific Request for Proposal or Request for Qualification. The Small Business Advocate educates potential prime contractors on the Authority's small business program and goals. For small and diverse businesses interested in subcontract opportunities, these events provide information and an opportunity to meet with potential primes.

Business Advisory Council Profiles



Debbie Hunsaker, Fresno Chamber of Commerce Representative

Championing Small Business: Debbie Hunsaker

Debbie Hunsaker has been a member of the Business Advisory Council (BAC) since its inception and served as Chair of the Construction Committee. Representing the Fresno Chamber of Commerce, she brings a deep dedication to supporting small businesses and fostering connections within the high-speed rail project community. Hunsaker offers a practical, hands-on perspective shaped by decades of experience running a successful business and working closely with local contractors, making her a trusted advocate for small businesses navigating complex public-sector opportunities. Her guidance and advocacy are highly valued by both the Authority and the local business community.

Hunsaker is the president and CEO of Alert-O-Lite, a family-owned business serving the Fresno region for 55

years. Alert-O-Lite provides traffic control, safety supplies, construction equipment, and signage, emphasizing exceptional service for contractors, municipalities, and agencies. As a certified Woman-Owned and Small Business Enterprise, the company is committed to helping other small businesses thrive and creating opportunities that benefit the broader community.

Hunsaker uses her BAC platform to educate businesses about opportunities on the high-speed rail project, share insights and resources, and help disadvantaged businesses navigate complex project requirements, build meaningful partnerships, and feel confident in their ability to succeed.

Over the past year, Hunsaker and the Chamber have worked closely with project contractors, advocating for small and disadvantaged businesses and connecting them with key partners. She actively supports efforts to address compliance challenges such as paperwork, reporting, and insurance requirements that can be daunting for smaller firms.

Hunsaker's participation in the BAC has strengthened communication between the Authority and small businesses. The project team appreciates her dedication, expertise, and tireless advocacy, which continues to make a meaningful impact. Looking ahead, she remains excited about the evolving high-speed rail opportunities and continues to champion small businesses, celebrate their successes, and support the long-term growth of her community.

Business Advisory Council Profiles



Deborah Robertson, Executive Board Member on the California African American Chamber of Commerce (CAACC)

Deborah Robertson: Advancing Equity Through Experience and Leadership

Deborah Robertson has been a member of the BAC since 2023 and serves as an executive board member on the California African American Chamber of Commerce (CAACC). Robertson brings decades of public service and institutional knowledge to the BAC and its Legislative and Professional Services Committees. In this role, she works to ensure that policy intent, procurement frameworks, and implementation practices meaningfully support participation by small, minority, and women-owned businesses, particularly in large-scale transportation and infrastructure investments.

Robertson is the former mayor of Rialto, California, as well as a retired senior manager from the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). Her career included oversight of the federal Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) program, certification and compliance reviews, and service as Deputy District Director of External Affairs in one of the state's largest districts. She also represented Caltrans in Washington, D.C., gaining valuable insight into federal transportation policy and implementation.

Through her leadership with CAACC, Robertson champions economic equity statewide. The chamber has partnered with state leadership, including Secretary Toks Omishakin, through the CAACC Economic Summit (2024 to 2026) and allied with the California Hispanic and Asian Chambers to sponsor AB 2019, requiring 25 percent small business participation on state contracts.

Additionally, Robertson and CAACC have taken an active advocacy role with the California Public Utilities Commission to ensure mergers, such as Verizon and Frontier, comply with requirements supporting minority, women, veteran, Native American, and LGBTQ-owned businesses. Her work emphasizes accountability, transparency, and measurable outcomes while providing guidance to help small businesses navigate procurement and compliance.

For Robertson, the high-speed rail project is more than a transportation project — it is a platform for inclusive economic growth and opportunity. The Authority deeply values her leadership, expertise, and dedication in helping small businesses thrive and ensuring they are active, contributing partners in this transformative project.

From High-Speed Rail to Successful Startup

Nicolas Townes Shares His Story



Nicolas Townes, Managing Principal, Omnia Associates

We spoke with Nicolas Townes, Managing Principal at [Omnia Associates](#), to learn how his experience on California High-Speed Rail shaped his career path and led him to his current role.

Q: Please describe your professional background and your current role.

I am a Project Management Professional (PMP)-certified leader in public involvement, construction outreach, and strategic communications with more than a decade of experience supporting major transportation programs across California.

My work on the high-speed rail project has included public outreach, stakeholder engagement, and corridor coordination in multiple regions, including communications for the Los

Angeles to San Diego section and the Connected Corridors Study, as well as support for the San Francisco to San Jose and San Jose to Merced project sections. I also worked on VTA's BART Silicon Valley Phase II Extension and Caltrain's Peninsula Corridor Electrification Project, where I helped manage impacts, access, safety, business concerns, and community trust across complex, multi-agency environments.

Across all these efforts, I focus on the intersection of stakeholder coordination and project delivery. I build engagement systems that make complex information clear, align partners, reduce risk, protect schedule, improve cost control, and strengthen credibility with the public, agencies, and funders.

Q: How did your time working on the high-speed rail project shape your understanding of large, complex rail programs and stakeholder coordination?

My work on the high-speed rail project reinforced a simple truth: engagement is part of the delivery infrastructure. On large transportation projects, stakeholder dynamics are not separate from the critical path. They shape it. When engagement is built into project management, it delivers real value through fewer surprises, faster issue resolution, reduced escalation, stronger alignment across agencies and jurisdictions, and clearer decision pathways that help prevent delays.

I approach outreach with the same discipline applied to schedule, budget, and risk. That includes setting a predictable communications cadence, mapping decisions to the right audiences, anticipating friction points before they become disruptions, and closing the loop so stakeholders see follow-through. When done well, engagement protects

schedule, reduces exposure to claims and work stoppages, supports funding confidence, and helps deliver the project efficiently and cost effectively.

Q: Omnia Associates is a relatively new start-up. Can you tell us how it was founded, what services it provides, and the mission that guides your work?

Omnia Associates was founded to bring senior-level strategy and field-tested execution together in one integrated outreach partner for complex public programs. We provide construction outreach planning and implementation, stakeholder and interagency coordination, facilitation and meeting design, and strategic communications that hold up under public scrutiny and project pressure.

Our mission is to help major programs earn and maintain legitimacy while moving efficiently through complexity. We build outreach systems that are measurable, defensible, and directly tied to project outcomes, especially risk reduction, schedule protection, and cost-effective delivery. In practice, that means we do more than communicate. We operationalize

coordination, run clean processes, document what matters, and help teams move faster with fewer unforced errors.

Q: What guidance would you share for someone interested in following a similar path, moving from public megaprojects to joining or launching a start-up?

Treat megaproject experience as a delivery toolkit rather than a job title. Learn how decisions move, how risk compounds, how schedules slip, and how small issues become major problems when they are not addressed early. Then translate your value into outcomes: the risk you reduce, the schedule you protect, and the ways you make delivery more efficient.

If you want to join or launch a start-up, be clear about the problem you solve, who pays for it, and how you will deliver consistently. Invest early in systems, templates, and governance because reliability is what scales. Build relationships with integrity and show follow-through. In this space, your reputation is your pipeline.



Bringing Rail Stations into the Light

A Spotlight on Lighting Consultant Claudio Ramos



Claudio Ramos, Director, Electrolight

The Grand Hall at Salesforce Transit Center, the future northern hub of California high-speed rail, is welcoming with its soaring atrium. The space is dramatic and warm. It invites travelers into the busy transit hub.

The ambiance reflects the work of two famous firms — designer Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects and lighting consultant Auerbach Glasow — but lighting consultant Claudio Ramos firmly believes every train station should feature such beautiful and impactful lighting.

He will now be working to bring that vision to life. Ramos' firm, [Electrolight](#), a Minority Business Enterprise (MBE), is supporting prime contractor Smith Group in the lighting design for future high-speed rail stations in Fresno, Bakersfield, and elsewhere.

Ramos was a young architect in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, when he started working for a small Japanese Brazilian architectural firm with a focus on light. His fate was set.

Lighting design became his career and took him to projects around the world. Ramos was recently named to the College of



Claudio Ramos of Electrolight will be helping design the lighting for Central Valley high-speed rail stations.

Fellows of the International Association of Lighting Designers, the professional association for the field.

“What I love and have always loved about lighting design is it lets me be artistic and technical at the same time. It uses all parts of my brain,” Ramos said.

It demands a kind of practical creativity. Lighting design is in a period of rapid innovation, and Ramos remains passionate about the field. He is currently thinking about how miniaturization of technology will change lighting, because “we can now put the most powerful torch in the smallest decorative detail.”

He also continues to explore the RGBW spectrum, where a thread of white, alongside the traditional red-green-blue palette, unlocks sharper and stronger colors for public spaces.

Great lighting encourages people to enter a building and improves their experiences, Ramos said. That eye for color and detail will be important in designing California's high-speed rail stations to be even more memorable for riders.

ELECTRO
LIGHT

Building Outside the Box with The Design Collaborative



Jamie Garza, CEO, The Design Collaborative

Jamie Garza has a passion for making people talk to each other.

“You have to get people of different backgrounds to play together to build a building,” says Garza, CEO of [The Design Collaborative](#). “I’m not afraid to step out of my box to do that.”

The mission of The Design Collaborative is to get architects and engineers to talk with each other. This micro-small business, launched in 2018, is unique in that it blends these two traditionally distinct fields into a single fully integrated service. Rather than working solely within their expertise,

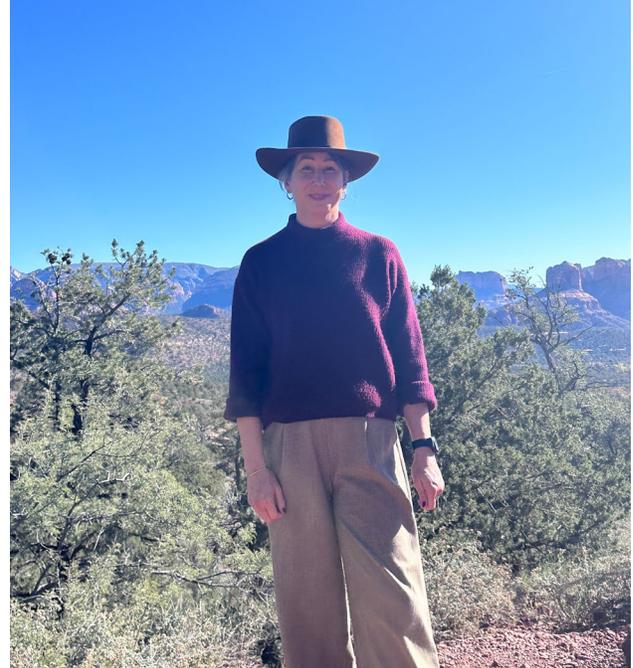
architects at The Design Collaborative must think ahead about how their designs impact engineers, and engineers must pay attention to architectural concerns of accessibility and aesthetic beauty.

“Sometimes it’s a forced collaboration,” she chuckles. “But I think that’s what makes a successful project. You could be an expert in your field, but if you’re not talking with others, that’s bad for building a cohesive project.”

It’s these principles of collaboration and open communication that make Garza feel right at home with California High-Speed Rail as she and her team work on the Fresno Station Early Works Project. With so many moving parts and players, Garza is a pro at making sure everybody’s strengths shine.

But Garza does not just prize diversity of expertise. “I’m especially proud of our LGBTBE (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Business Enterprise) certification,” says Garza. “We’re officially a queer-business enterprise. We are woman-owned, minority-owned, and our workforce is mostly women.”

Women and queer employees can often face additional pressures to fit into the expectations of standard work life, and Garza knows this. Much in the same way that Garza encourages architects and engineers to think and create outside the box, she also cultivates a work environment where nobody is pushed out of the industry for having obligations to children or for building non-traditional families. The only way to do that is by making sure people feel comfortable talking to one another and to management about the accommodations they need. Garza has no intention of letting her employees



In her role as CEO, Jamie Garza strives to create an inclusive work environment for her employees. As a certified LGBTBE, The Design Collaborative is a queer-business enterprise and a woman- and minority-owned firm.

be saddled with the pointless extra work of dealing with prejudice when they could instead focus solely on doing their best architectural and engineering work.

“Part of inclusivity is to be visible,” she says. “To be a female entrepreneur, to be open about being queer, it’s important to see women leading big projects, that women can have different life paths to combat the pressure of false conformance. We’re contributing to our environment, to our team, to our state, and to our communities. My message for anyone that is in the closet or doesn’t feel

like they fit in: You do your best work when you’re not worrying about that stuff. Be yourself — you’re accepted and loved.”

Garza is excited to ride the high-speed rail once it’s up and running. “In this country we have a lack of public transportation right now, so this is an exciting first. I hope you love it, I hope you vote and advocate for more high-speed rail and transportation that helps equalize our communities. Enjoy it and encourage more of it.”

**the
design
collaborative**



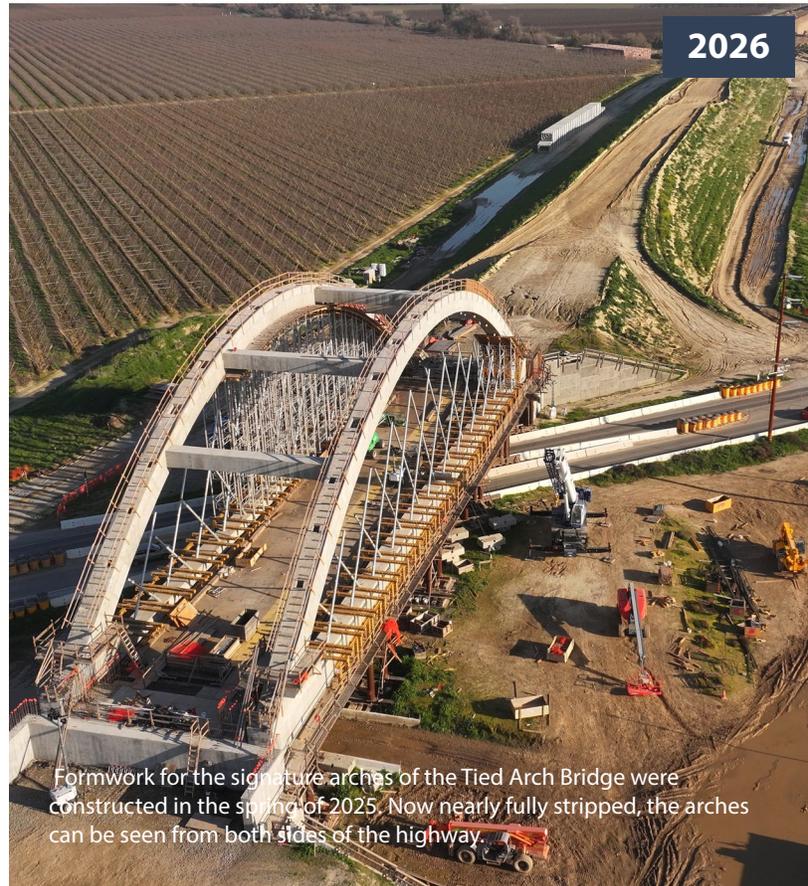
STATE ROUTE 43 TIED ARCH BRIDGE

Two Years of Progress

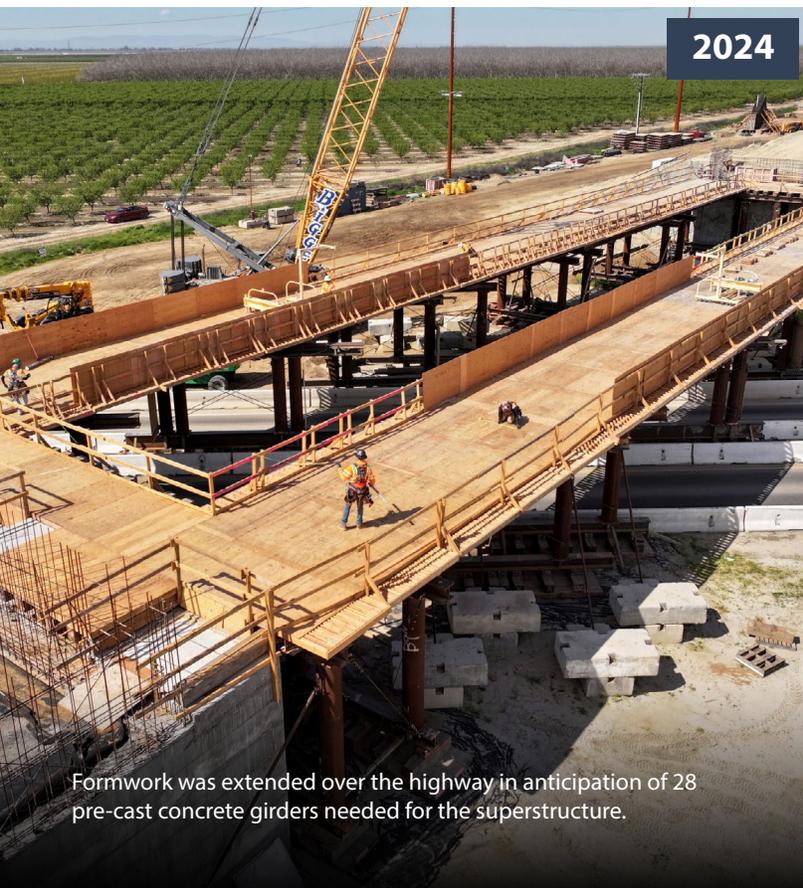
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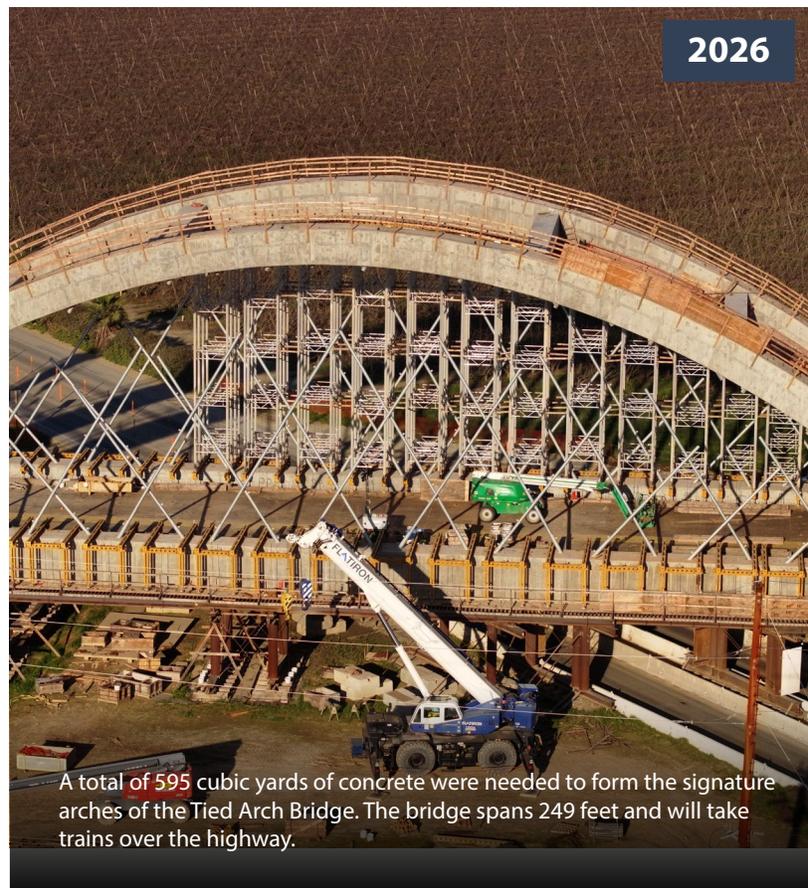
In March 2024, crews at the Tied Arch Bridge extended formwork over State Route 43 in Fresno County.



Formwork for the signature arches of the Tied Arch Bridge were constructed in the spring of 2025. Now nearly fully stripped, the arches can be seen from both sides of the highway.



Formwork was extended over the highway in anticipation of 28 pre-cast concrete girders needed for the superstructure.



A total of 595 cubic yards of concrete were needed to form the signature arches of the Tied Arch Bridge. The bridge spans 249 feet and will take trains over the highway.