

HSR: SPRAWL INSTEAD OF SMART GROWTH?



Continued from Cover

1998 and early 1999 that Areias was seeking buyers for the failed dairy farm.

According to HSRA records, Areias was later paid \$54,000 by PB for work between April and June, 2003 as a liaison to local agencies regarding environmental impacts of the line, with funds conveyed through the Republican political consulting firm California Strategies. When California Rail News asked HSRA for any meeting notes or reports produced by Areias under this contract pursuant to a Public Records Act request, staffer Pourvehidi told us that none existed, and that Areias was paid for participation in meetings during that time, not for any specific work products.

Despite his participation a year ago in the environmental analysis of this specific segment of the project, Areias claimed in a letter to the Sacramento Bee on February 24 that "Reading [the Bee's January 25] piece was my first awareness of any proposal to



Can the prospect of a high speed rail station connecting this cow pasture to the Silicon Valley bring on the "New California Gold Rush?"

place the station in that location."

On the southern end of the high speed starter segment, a similar realignment of the high speed line is proceeding which could mean yet another detour for developers, this one lengthening travel time for Bay Area-Los Angeles expresses by up to 20 minutes.

The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority (LACMTA) unanimously (12-0) approved a resolution supporting the HSRA's Palmdale alternative. The action was well-rehearsed. There was no debate of the motion and only four public speakers were heard. LACMTA's Chairman said before public comment: "this is going to pass, all four speakers have checked 'support' on their speaker cards, do you really need to speak?"

Previous actions by the Los Angeles City Council and Board of Supervisors also backed Palmdale. Ostensibly, the purpose of the detour is to serve the never-developed Palmdale international airport site, but that logic never was very convincing, because Palmdale hasn't mustered the political juice to bring in a single air carrier. A better name for the route is the Mojave Desert route, since most of its financial and political support appears to come from groups with holdings further north, where high speed rail's impacts upon land value would be dramatic.

It's a mirror image of the Silicon Valley and Los Banos situation. The biggest gains are for leapfrog developers where land is in large parcels and not bid up by previous development. Land speculators and developers who see the potential that forty-minute travel times to Downtown Los Angeles could provide to their holdings are hot to promote their route. Also, just like Los Banos, it doesn't matter to people selling the land whether the line actually gets built, if the people buying the land think it will.

Just like in Northern California, a detour for development would produce very significant negative impacts upon sensitive and

unique habitat in the Tehachapis, but the difference is that the project is not yet on the radar screen of environmental organizations in the southland.

TRAC officially supports a Grapevine Route, and considers it better from both environmental and transportation perspectives. TRAC supports a "high-speed compatible line" from Santa Clarita to Palmdale to serve the population of existing communities and to acknowledge the political realities of Antelope Valley developers' political power. However, TRAC does not endorse twisting the main line away from the shortest path between the Bay Area and Los Angeles.

Palmdale's advocates have commissioned consultants to do travel-time and geological studies to bolster their case. Their claims are that a Palmdale route would be less costly to build, safer geologically, and require only six minutes additional running time for express trains than Grapevine. Some of their data regarding the HSRA work is very convincing, particularly regarding tunnelling problems.

Given myriad questions left unanswered by the EIR, it may be the safest thing to put off implementation of high speed rail a bit longer. Legislative moves to save the project by putting off the vote are proceeding, but no one seems motivated to start construction until key design issues are solved. Sen. Jackie Speier (D-Hillsborough), Sen. Don Perata (D-Oakland) and Senate Transportation Chair Kevin Murray (D-Los Angeles) have endorsed language to delay the bond to November 2006. Speier and Perata want the project to study Altamont.

AB 2865, just passed by the Assembly, authored by Assembly Member Russ Bogh (R-Moreno Valley), would put the vote off to 2008, reportedly reflecting Gov. Schwarzenegger's views. Senator Tom McClintock (R-Thousand Oaks), always the naysayer, has authored language that would put a permanent end to the project.

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