

Desert high-speed train draws detractors

By DUG BEGLEY | The Press-Enterprise

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With one month left before federal officials finalize plans for a high-speed train from Victorville to Las Vegas, opponents of the project worry it will take money from High Desert cities and potentially destroy pristine landscapes and sensitive wildlife.

The Federal Railroad Administration -- which must approve the \$6 billion Desert Xpress project -- unveiled the final environmental report last week and will open public comment today on the 185-mile route. Supporters and opponents have one month to review the environmental report and respond.

Barstow and Baker, cities that rely heavily on travelers to stop for gas and food, are fretting that the train could divert a lot of their business. And skeptics worry that vital habitats for the desert tortoise, bighorn sheep and Gila monsters could be lost.

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Proponents have spent more than six years planning for the trains, which would carry riders from Victorville to Las Vegas. They have secured key federal backing from Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., and a recent endorsement from U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood.

But those years of planning and support from federal lawmakers have not resolved many of the concerns of High Desert businesses and environmentalists.

"I do think there is a need for high-speed rail," said David Lamfrom, California desert program manager for the National Parks Conservation Association. "But we have to carefully consider the cost and benefits. There is a benefit, but is it worth some of the costs?"

Once the environmental review is adopted by federal rail officials, the project can finish its final design. It would take four years to build, at a cost of around \$6 billion, according to the latest estimates from the company. Backers say the line will be paid for with private funds, though a federal loan might be needed to start construction.

Desert Xpress officials did not respond to requests for comment Tuesday and Thursday.

Tracks could be laid from Las Vegas to Victorville, mostly parallel to I-15, and electrical lines strung along the route. The all-electric trains could make the trip between the High Desert and Las Vegas in 85 minutes, a drive that takes three hours or more, depending on traffic.

Federal officials, including LaHood, who has supported national high-speed rail development, tout the jobs the projects would create.

"Just think about the possibility," LaHood wrote on his blog following a Las Vegas stop to support the project. "Factory workers building electric-powered trains. Engineers laying new track. Conductors, operators and ticket-takers helping passengers speed to their destinations. Americans of every trade advancing down the track to a better future."

BLOW TO BUSINESS

Desert Xpress also has faced stiff opposition from officials and businesses in cities like Barstow and Baker, which cater to the 45,000 vehicles that drive through the desert on I-15. If the train takes 20 percent of the travelers away from the freeway, the sales loss to the cities could be devastating, some business and city leaders said.

"How could that not impact," said Carol Randall, a Barstow real estate agent who is helping revive the city's Harvey House, a local tourist stop. "We are an I-15 town."

She said many gas stations and restaurants would close if they lost one-fifth their business, leading to lower sales tax revenues for the city and higher unemployment.

City officials in the past have predicted more than 2,000 jobs would be lost in the city, which has a total workforce of slightly more than 10,000.

But an analysis by Redlands economist John Husing, prepared as part of the environmental review process, concluded Barstow would lose 542 jobs.

"While these are negative impacts, they do not constitute the devastating impact and urban decay city officials worry will occur," Husing wrote.

The train will create 18,361 jobs annually over the four-year construction period, about 1,600 of those in the Barstow area, Husing found.

Temporary jobs aren't enough to keep Barstow supportive of the project, Randall said.

"If you are doing this for clean air, or to get a rail line, fine, but then kick back what we're losing," Randall said. "If this will take 25 percent of our business away, then give that back to us."

Losing more business would cripple High Desert cities, she added. The area already is seeing some shipping and moving companies leaving the area.

"You've got trucks looking to leave California and a high-speed train looking to expedite that gambling money from California to Harry Reid's house," Randall said. "We're going to plead and beg and borrow whatever we can do to fight for Barstow."

HABITATS HURT

Environmentalists worry the trains would do more harm than good. Taking cars off the road reduces vehicle emissions, but construction of the route will leave an impact on some of the most sensitive areas of the Mojave, they say. Rare plants such as Joshua trees and centuries-old Mojave creosote would be displaced.

About two square miles of habitat for the desert tortoise -- fully protected by federal and state laws -- would be permanently affected.

The preferred route through the Ivanpah Valley on the California-Nevada border would swing the tracks away from I-15 through a section where tortoises are being relocated to allow for a solar power plant, said Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

A natural gas pipeline also is planned in the Ivanpah Valley, where one solar project is under construction and two more are planned.

"The Desert Xpress and the proposed gas line project make a mockery of 'avoidance' and mitigation for desert tortoise from the solar project," Anderson said in an email.

What might be less damaging for the tortoises is if the train traveled through a small section of the Mojave National Preserve south of I-15 through the Ivanpah Valley, said Larry Whalon, the preserve's interim superintendent. Whalon said National Park Service officials have told Desert Xpress backers the procedure for taking a portion of the preserve, which would require an act of Congress.

Lamfrom, for one, is opposed to that idea, but said he is hopeful many of the issues can be resolved.

"The take of any tortoise is a blow," he said. "We are investing millions of dollars into saving this species."

Many desert creatures could see their territories fragmented by the train, which could be difficult for them to cross. Animals can use washes to get beneath the freeway, he said.

"But the train, I don't see that as passable with a rail line and the electrical system," he said.

Similar environmental concerns were raised earlier in the process, Lamfrom said. Desert Xpress backers adjusted the plan following meetings in 2009, and according to the final environmental report have sufficiently mitigated the damages.

But some questions remain, Lamfrom said.

"In some cases we don't feel the explanations we have been given so far are sufficient," he said.

Staff Writer David Danelski contributed to this report.

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Impact report

To read the environmental report on the proposed high-speed rail project, go to:

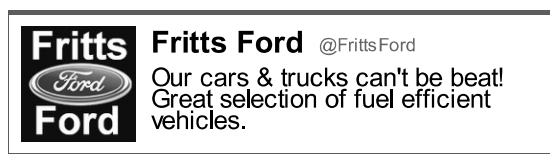
Victorville City Library, 15011 Circle Drive

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Source: Federal Railroad Administration





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