

# Transportation secretary LaHood in Fresno, defends high-speed rail

By Tim Sheehan

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America's top transportation official offered a spirited defense of high-speed rail plans Wednesday in Fresno but said that he and other supporters are aware of "serious concerns that people may have."

U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood talked to reporters after a downtown Fresno meeting with business owners, including some whose buildings would be displaced by California's plans for high-speed trains through the Valley connecting San Francisco and Los Angeles. Later in the day, he planned to meet with farmers and ranchers before heading to Sacramento to talk with state legislators.

LaHood's visit to the San Joaquin Valley comes one day after Kern County supervisors voted to oppose the state's high-speed rail plans. That county joins Kings, Tulare and Madera counties and several cities.

LaHood said he's not bothered by the shifting opinions.

"The reason we came here is to listen to people," he said. "Anytime you do big things, they are always going to be controversial. There will always be those who have their objections. Our job is to understand the concerns and work to mitigate those."

The federal government has allocated about \$3.5 billion in economic stimulus and transportation money to California's plan, provided that construction begin in the San Joaquin Valley. To qualify for the money, California must pony up about \$2.8 billion in matching funds and complete the first 130-mile leg from Madera to Bakersfield by 2017.

"One of the reasons that we have made those investments in California is because of the extraordinary amount of work that has gone on for almost two decades to implement passenger rail," LaHood said. "No other place in the country has worked as hard or as long as California has to implement passenger rail."

But no high-speed trains would run on the system until tracks are extended from the Valley to either the Bay Area or the Los Angeles Basin. And throughout the Valley and elsewhere in the state, concerns are growing over the rising cost for the project -- estimated in November at about \$98 billion for the S.F.-L.A. phase -- and the effects on homes, farms and businesses in the path.

Particularly in Kings and Madera counties, farmers and dairy operators worry about the line bisecting their land and affecting their ability to get from one side of their farm to the other, as well as how they will be compensated for the losses to their operations.

Dan Richard, the new chairman of the California High-Speed Rail Authority, met with some Kings County farmers last month to pledge his effort to make sure their concerns are not ignored.

"We know that there are issues and concerns and impacts on businesses and farms and dairies, and we are committed to working just as hard as we can to minimize those," Richard said Wednesday.

LaHood said he understands that it's difficult for people to face the possible disruption of their farm or business.

"Some people will say no, but I think many will listen and see what our solutions are," he added. "We will not turn a blind eye to anyone who will listen to us and work with us to mitigate the loss of whatever they're losing, whether it's agricultural land or a business building."