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HIGH-SPEED RAIL

Merced letter denounces route change

BY THADDEUS MILLER

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Merced's leaders have drafted a letter that will go to Sacramento this month expressing their anger with the city being left out of the initial high-speed rail plans.

Area leaders have said they felt betrayed by the latest round of planning changes, which put off Merced's stop until 2029. The proposed plans are to first build a 250-mile segment of the rail that would run from north of Bakersfield to San Jose, with the westward bend near Chowchilla.

"While the Silicon Valley to Central Valley segment may be cheaper to construct, it is not what the legislature voted for in 2012 to enable HSR construction to begin or in 2014 to provide the substantial ongoing cap-and-trade funding required for the HSR rail project to be viable," the letter says.

The Merced City Council unanimously approved the letter with edits to be made by the city manager by a 6-0 vote. Councilman Noah Lor was absent.

The new plans would begin operating in 2025, three years later than the previous plan that called for trains to run from Merced to the San Fernando Valley by 2022.

The California High-Speed Rail Authority's Draft 2016 Business Plan, which outlines designs to push Merced's stop back seven years, is set to go to the Capitol in May. Cities have the rest of this month to submit official comment for the record.

The rail's commitment to include Merced in the initial operating segment was critical for the support to pass Proposition 1A in 2008, which approved $9.95 billion in general obligation bonds, the letter argues.

"This was supposed to serve underserved cities," Mayor Stan Thurston said. "By eliminating Merced, I think you could make the argument they are violating Prop. 1A."

The letter goes on to argue that the changes affect more than just Merced.

"The three Central Valley counties that would be most likely to have commuters to the Silicon Valley interested in taking a high-speed passenger rail service would be from San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties – none of which are served by the current HSR route," the letter argues.

Supporters have said the new plan lets the state build an operating portion of the line without relying on additional money that might never come. Supporters have said they hope construction will generate momentum and private investment to pay for the rest of the project south to the Los Angeles area.

Assemblyman Adam Gray, D-Merced, also spoke out last week against the new plans from Shafter to San Jose.

"I think it's a major betrayal of the northern San Joaquin Valley and the Sacramento region, which have been, and continue to be, huge supporters of the high-speed rail concept," he said.

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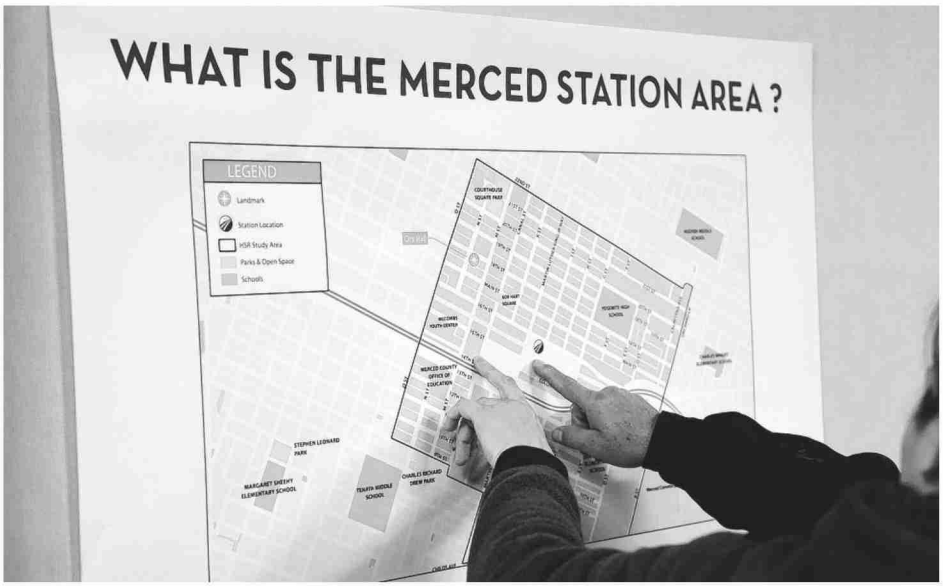

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Merced residents look at a map of the proposed high-speed rail stop in Merced during a rail workshop at City Hall in February. The city is now not in the plan until 2029.

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