



MAYOR ASHLEY SWEARENGIN

May 8, 2013

Cynthia Brown
Chief Section of Administration
Surface Transportation Board
395 E Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20423-0001

234197
ENTERED
Office of Proceedings
May 9, 2013
Part of
Public Record

RE: Comments Concerning California High-Speed Rail Authority's (CHSRA) Petition for Exemption
– Docket No. FD 35724

Dear Ms. Brown:

I write to respectfully urge the Surface Transportation Board to expeditiously grant the petition for exemption filed by the CHSRA for the construction of the 65-mile Madera to Fresno Section.

As high-speed rail planning is happening throughout the nation and California's project is the first of its kind entering construction, I can appreciate that the Surface Transportation Board's (Board) decision has important implications from this point forward. As such, I do believe that careful consideration is warranted, but this should not result in lengthy delay. Expeditious approval of the petition for exemption is greatly needed for the reasons enumerated below.

While under consideration, Fresno continues to suffer from double-digit unemployment and one of the highest rates of concentration of poverty in the United States¹. The Fresno metro unemployment average in February 2013 was 15.4%,² exactly twice the national average in the same time period. As unemployment suppresses local economic activity, which in turn lowers local tax revenues (affecting the balance of the City's budget), we are constantly monitoring local unemployment levels. The CSHR project will soon provide thousands of local jobs which are urgently needed. By putting local residents back to work, the project is not simply supporting those local companies directly contracting with the Authority, but other local businesses that benefit when residents have additional income to spend on items for themselves and their families. These jobs will strengthen a struggling regional economy. In addition, any delay in providing these local workers with employment can mean, in some cases, the difference between making a house payment and entering foreclosure.

Should the project face a prolonged delay, local businesses impacted by the high-speed rail alignment would be faced with great uncertainty. Many of these businesses have expressed a desire for a clear timeline for acquisition and compensation, and some would prefer an expeditious timeline. To have an extended period of uncertainty would be detrimental to the property owners and businesses. Those

¹ Brookings Institution, *The Re-Emergence of Concentrated Poverty: Metropolitan Trends in the 2000s*. November 2011. www.brookings.edu (relevant excerpts attached as Attachment A).

² Bureau of Labor Statistic, *Labor Force Statistics*. <http://www.bls.gov/cps/>

Cynthia Brown

May 8, 2013

Page 2

businesses that lease to others will find that their ability to retain/attract tenants may be further compromised. In addition, those businesses that have been making arrangements based on anticipated property acquisition schedules will lose trust with the process.

Lastly, if implementation of the Madera-Fresno sub-portion of the Merced-Fresno Section is substantially delayed, it would have a significant impact to the Fresno community (assuming the federal construction completion deadline still had to be met). It would effectively mean that construction would have to be accelerated. Without such acceleration, there is opportunity to stage the construction and alternate major road closures. A shortening in the construction window could result in the need to: (1) close numerous roadways simultaneously, causing business impacts, loss of productivity, loss of jobs, excess usage of fuel, worsening air quality and a generally significant impact on the quality of life in Fresno and/or (2) work round-the-clock at certain locations, thereby creating unacceptable noise and community disruption. Neither approach (1) or (2) would be supported by the City.

For the reasons stated above, I strongly and respectfully urge the Board to grant the petition for exemption for the Madera to Fresno Section.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ashley Swearengin". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Ashley Swearengin
Mayor