

What to Expect When You're Expecting Passenger Rail: How Central Valley Communities are Preparing for High-Speed Rail

Project 2538
June 2026

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Introduction

Imagine a brand-new transportation system connecting places in ways they have never connected before. Now imagine you have to gain political approval from diverse and polarized groups and local governments to build this system. This is exactly the task the state of California set for itself in constructing the High-Speed Rail (HSR). The current project asks how local governments are preparing for this new system given our car dominant culture and years of political opposition. Specifically, we ask how Central Valley communities are preparing for HSR construction and implementation while balancing multiple competing priorities and connecting with existing transportation systems. This research provides new insights into how preparation for the HSR looks for the communities on the ground who need to not only imagine this work, but make it happen.

Study Methods

To study these questions, the researchers began by examining publicly available documents shared by local governments. We located and analyzed transportation planning and policy documents from cities, counties, and Councils of Government (regional governments). By analyzing the policy and planning activities that local actors created, we first wanted to see how local governments are communicating about HSR planning. Using the insights from the document analysis, we also interviewed the local government administrators whose job it is to plan for and work with state officials on HSR. These interviews allowed for a more in-depth understanding of how these local governments are preparing for the new HSR system.

We interviewed 17 different actors from cities, counties, regional and state organizations, and nonprofits. We asked these interview subjects about the challenges and constraints they have faced in

this process. We also sought to understand the key insights and lessons they have learned from working on the HSR project. The interviews were electronically recorded, and the data from both the interviews and document analysis was analyzed using qualitative coding software. Data triangulation methods were used during the analysis to ensure that major themes reflect a range of data sources. The researchers received IRB approval from California State University, Fresno (Fresno State) to research human subjects and reported the information from the interviews confidentially to protect the privacy of the interviewees.

This research distills key lessons from California's Central Valley on how local communities can address challenges, build legitimacy, and further mobility when implementing high-speed rail in regions with strong political opposition and car dependency.

Findings

Findings revealed that Central Valley planning staff view the HSR project as being mostly promising for the region. They view it as a way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and help the region grow economically: "We're very concerned about the environment and wanting to do things to kind of help the valley grow in a way that's responsible." According to some interview respondents, leaders view the project as one with a lot of potential for the region, sometimes even encouraging leaders to cross political lines to support it, such as in the case of Fresno's Mayor Jerry Dyer. While there are still challenges to gaining the public's trust due to the state's past efforts and perceived political slights in the Central Valley, in particular, the interview subjects were generally positive about it.

The respondents also viewed the HSR project as one with potential to create new regional and local transportation initiatives throughout the region. One respondent explained: "Something that many people don't really understand is that when you have high-speed rail in there, it's going to unlock a lot of other potential projects that wouldn't have otherwise

been considered, right?" Staff members explained that the project can unlock the potential for new bus infrastructure, pedestrian infrastructure, and light rail infrastructure to help connect to the stations. Additionally, it has already caused some local governments to think more broadly about regional transportation such as the Cross Valley Corridor. Therefore, respondents view the HSR project as a catalyst for other new projects and innovations, particularly ones that do not rely on automobiles.

Policy/Practice Recommendations

This research reveals the importance of collaboration for large scale planning efforts such as the HSR. Much of the distrust stemmed from interactions with state-hired consultants and past experiences working with the state. However, cooperation between state, regional, and local agencies remains key for these types of projects. Though questions of funding and support from various elected officials will continue to remain challenges for the project, local actors are thoughtfully considering how best to prepare for the challenges and opportunities that will come with the California HSR.

About the Authors

Dr. Josephine Hazelton-Boyle and Dr. Naomi Bick are faculty in the Department of Political Science at Fresno State and research topics related to transportation policy.

To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at <https://transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2538>



MTI is a University Transportation Center sponsored by the US Department of Transportation, the California Department of Transportation, and public and private grants, including those made available by the Road Repair and Accountability Act of 2017 (SB1). The Institute is part of San José State University's Lucas Graduate School of Business.