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Officials seek to ease rail fears

By: Alisha Semchuck



PALMDALE - City officials sought input from their constituents about a transportation plan that includes a high-speed rail element.

More than 60 city residents attended a special meeting Thursday night at the Chimbole

Cultural Center, which focused on the proposed Palmdale High-Speed Rail Station Area Plan. Mike Behen, the city's Transportation/GIS manager, greeted the crowd.

"Why are we here?" Behen asked the crowd.

Answering his own question, Behen said the city is undertaking a project founded on the future development of a High-Speed Rail Multimodal Transit Station near downtown Palmdale.

The study will be focused between Rancho Vista Boulevard (Avenue P) at the north and Avenue R at the south, with the Antelope Valley Freeway to the west and 20th Street East on the eastern perimeter, according to Behen.

"The focus area is a half-mile radius around the future high-speed rail station," Behen said. "The existing Metrolink station will not be there anymore, but it will be integrated into the design. Tentatively there will be 12 total tracks."

Antelope Valley Transit Authority bus service also will be included in the design, he added.

One woman, who did not state her name, asked about noise pollution from the trains.

"I want to know what the noise level will be. It's already ridiculous at 3 o'clock in the morning," she said of the freight trains that roll through Palmdale.

Roland Genick, chief architect of transport with Parsons, the Pasadena-based consulting firm the city contracted for the study, assured her that the high-speed rail trains "will not blow their horns."

Noise mitigation is part of the project study. Mitigation measures include the installation of sound walls and other barriers.

Freight trains are a separate issue, and the developers of the high-speed rail project have no authority over freight trains, Genick said.

Of the high-speed rail, Genick said "federal law impacts will be identified and mitigated."

Someone else asked when the high-speed rail project would be completed.

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Genick said around 2029.

"We'll be dead by then," said Rosalie Hakewessell, owner of The Pizza Experience on the city's east side.

In speaking with a technical adviser, Linda Stevens of Palmdale said, "I want to see a Third Street Promenade. I want to see a Grove. Palmdale is very western. You could bring that through. It would be, to me, an atmosphere of happiness."

Three grants make the study possible, Behen said: A \$120,000 grant from the Southern California Association of Governments, a \$400,000 grant from the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority and an \$800,000 grant from the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

Mayor Jim Ledford described the high-speed rail as an "exciting opportunity for our city."

"Can you imagine Burbank to Palmdale in 20 minutes?" Ledford asked the crowd, saying it would take 30 minutes to travel from Palmdale to Los Angeles and an hour and a half to reach Las Vegas.

Ledford envisioned corporations moving to the area because it's a location where their employees can afford to purchase a home, and by living close to their job, they won't lose time commuting to work.

"We've been pursuing this for 20 years," Ledford said. "We've started the environmental process for the Burbank to Palmdale segment.

"You may not need a car to live in Palmdale and work in Los Angeles."

Despite criticism of its cost, Ledford said the high-speed rail is "the most cost-efficient way to deal with (traffic) congestion management" and resolve unhealthy air quality issues.

The goals of the study are to enhance local and regional multimodal transportation options; create short and long-term economic development opportunities; generate opportunities for transit-oriented development; and promote smart growth development, Genick said.

Genick recited the vision statement: "The Palmdale (High-Speed Rail) Station Area Plan will be a 21st century gateway, bringing together citizens from Palmdale, the region and the state, celebrating the union of transportation, community and the environment.

"It will be a vibrant mixed-use center that stands emblematic for the sustainable economic and social development of the area and be a symbol for the vision of a better Palmdale."

Ledford, Behen and Genick emphasized that the main thrust of Thursday night's meeting was for them to hear from the residents - all their ideas and any concerns.

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