
MEMORANDUM

DATE: May 4, 2004

TO: Mary J. Alvord, City Manager

FROM: Susan M. Georgino, Community Development Director
Via Greg Herrmann, Assistant Community Development Director – Transportation
By David L. Kriske, Transportation Analyst

SUBJECT: **Comments on California High Speed Train Project Draft Environmental Impact Report / Environmental Impact Statement**

Purpose

The California High Speed Rail Authority has released a Program-Level Draft Environmental Impact Report / Environmental Impact Statement (EIR/EIS) representing preliminary feasibility and design for a proposed High Speed Train connecting northern and southern California. This preliminary study proposes a number of route and station alternatives that if constructed would be routed through the City of Burbank. Staff has reviewed the Draft EIR/EIS and prepared a summary of the scope of the project, its potential impacts to the city, and a list of concerns and issues to be addressed during the study's public comment period.

Project Background

The California High Speed Rail Authority is proposing to construct a High Speed Train (HST) system in California which would extend from Sacramento and the Bay Area south to Los Angeles and San Diego and pass through the City of Burbank with a proposed station located within the City. The purpose of this preliminary environmental document is to investigate the feasibility for the project, identify impacts and mitigation strategies to these impacts, and develop initial design alternatives and cost estimates for various alignment and station options. The Authority is currently soliciting public comments on the Draft EIR/EIS and its recommendations. While staff has been monitoring the Authority's ongoing progress as it develops the proposed project, there has been no recommendation or policy direction made by staff or by prior City Councils in favor or opposition of the HST project.

The proposed HST line would utilize a conventional, steel-wheel-on-steel-track, electrically powered "bullet train" system operating at speeds of up to 220 miles per hour. The system would consist of a number of stations in the various cities in Sacramento, the Bay Area, Central Valley, Los Angeles, and San Diego. The purpose of the HST would be to meet the forecasted increase in inter-city passenger demand between the population centers of the state while also extending and improving short

and intermediate commute trips within regions. This demand for inter-city travel – expected to grow by 63% from 153 million annual passengers to 255 million annual passengers by 2020 – is currently served by commercial air carriers and the state highway network. The HST system would augment these systems with a train network that would be competitive with air and highway travel with regards to frequency, time, and cost considerations. If fully implemented, a total of 86 daily trains would provide regional and statewide service with typical travel times of 2 hours, 30 minutes for a Los Angeles to San Francisco trip, and just under 1 hour for a Los Angeles to San Diego trip. Expected ridership at buildout is expected to be between 42 and 68 million annual passengers. Total project cost is expected to be approximately \$35 billion with financing expected to be provided by a series of state bond initiatives, the first of which is tentatively scheduled to appear on the November 2004 ballot.

The HST project would be built using a variety of alignment and configuration options, including at-grade track, aerial guideways, trenches, and tunnels. Alignments under study include the use of existing transportation corridors, alignments adjacent to existing facilities, as well as all-new alignments. Within the City of Burbank, both proposed alignment options under study primarily utilize the existing UPRR/Metrolink railroad right-of-way in either at-grade, trenched, or aerial configuration.

High Speed Train Project Evaluation Methodology

State and Federal law requires that a project of this size and scope be fully analyzed for its potential environmental impacts to the surrounding communities in which it is proposed to be built. For a project as large as the California High Speed Train project, this analysis is undertaken by producing a Program-Level Environmental Impact Report / Environmental Impact Statement (EIR/EIS). This approach allows the overall impacts and mitigations of a large transportation project to be identified for the purposes of evaluating feasibility, while deferring more detailed environmental work on items such as specific segments and station options to later, site specific projects. A Program Level EIR/EIS requires that the preferred project (in this case the HST project itself) be compared to project alternatives and to the “no-project” scenario. The Draft EIR/EIS for the HST project identifies the “Modal Alternative” as the alternative for which to compare the HST option. This alternative suggests that a series of road and airport improvements be assumed to meet the demand for increased inter-city travel instead of a high speed train. In Burbank under the Modal Alternative, improvements assumed include new freeway lanes on Interstate 5 and additional airport capacity at Burbank Airport. The “No-Project” alternative assumes no improvements to the road system other than what is already identified in transportation improvement plans and no expansion of Burbank Airport facilities.

Project Alignments in Burbank

The HST EIR/EIS presents two alignment options under study within the City of Burbank. The “UPRR/Metrolink” alignment follows the existing Metrolink railroad right of way along San Fernando Blvd and Victory Place. This alignment would enter the city

from the north at grade along San Fernando Blvd with the existing railroad tracks. There is a HST station option just north of Hollywood Way located within the Railroad ROW. This alignment follows the railroad tracks either within the ROW or directly adjacent to it through Burbank and gradually becomes elevated as it proceeds south, crossing over Buena Vista Street and the future Empire Avenue underpass in an elevated structure, matching the future configuration of the existing railroad tracks when the Empire Interchange is constructed. The HST alignment continues as an elevated structure above the existing tracks south of Magnolia Blvd. At Olive Avenue, the project description identifies another station option consisting of an elevated structure to be located immediately adjacent to the existing Burbank Downtown Station. The proposed alignment would then return to grade as it proceeds south, crossing under the Interstate 5 railroad overpass at Flower Street and continuing along the Metrolink ROW as it leaves the City to the south.

FIGURE A: PROPOSED HST ALIGNMENTS THROUGH BURBANK

Source: California High Speed Rail Authority Draft EIR/EIS



The second alignment under consideration is the “Combined UPRR/Metrolink & I-5 Alignment.” This alignment also enters the City from the north with a possible Burbank Airport Station option just north of Hollywood Way. It would then proceed south along the railroad ROW as it does under the “UPRR/Metrolink” alignment. However, in this configuration, the HST line would be elevated above the future Metrolink tracks,

crossing over the Burbank Blvd., Magnolia Blvd., and Olive Ave. overpasses with an elevated train station higher than is proposed under the “UPRR/Metrolink” Alignment. South of Olive Avenue, the alignment would diverge from the existing railroad ROW and proceed adjacent to and above Interstate 5 on the west side, crossing over Alameda Avenue and the existing I-5 ramps in an elevated structure.

Station Options

With both alignments under study, the HST EIR/EIS identifies two alternative station options to be pursued for further study within or adjacent to Burbank, with only one station ultimately slated for construction depending on the results of further study and input from other agencies. The Burbank Airport station would be located north of Burbank at San Fernando Blvd. and Hollywood Way and would provide connections to Burbank Airport. This station would not provide direct connections to the existing Metrolink service. The second station option would be located in Downtown Burbank directly adjacent to the Metrolink Station and would connect directly to Metrolink and MTA bus service, as well as potentially serve more riders. Both stations are expected to serve between 2.5 and 5.3 million annual passengers when the system is fully constructed.

Identified Impacts

The HST EIR/EIS studies the potential impacts to existing conditions in a number of different areas. This report analyzes the more significant, planning-level issues that should be considered when studying the feasibility of a statewide project such as the HST proposal. Below is a discussion of the project impacts to traffic and circulation, noise and vibration, land use compatibility, and aesthetics and visual compatibility. Within Burbank, these impacts are summarized below:

Traffic and Circulation

Either station alternative is expected to generate approximately 680-730 peak hour trips and would impact local streets within the city. The Burbank Airport station would be located at the north end of Hollywood Way and would likely impact several intersections along that arterial. The Burbank Downtown Station option benefits from better transit connectivity as well as more direct freeway access. However, the street network in this area lacks good connectivity to surrounding areas and would most likely need access improvements to serve the projected traffic volumes efficiently. It should also be noted that the current and future volumes predicted by the HST EIR/EIS on many streets in Burbank are not consistent with the City’s projections. This discrepancy will be addressed in the City’s comment letter in response to the Draft EIR/EIS. The preferred mitigation strategies for traffic and circulation impacts as identified by the EIR/EIS are encouraging better transit connectivity to and from the stations and spot street improvements to improve vehicular access.

Noise and Vibration

The development and operation of a High Speed Train would bring about noise and vibration impacts to the city primarily within the close vicinity of the rail line. The EIR/EIS identifies the Burbank portion of the rail line as operating at speeds of as much as 186 miles per hour, though due to the requirement for stopping at either the Burbank Downtown or Burbank Airport Station, average speeds for noise analysis are predicted to be approximately 115 mph. At these speeds, noise and vibrational sources are dominated by the interaction of the wheels and rails, and structural noises and vibrations from bridges. These noises are higher than that of a conventional train but are lower than that caused by an 8-lane freeway. Also, the duration of the HST noises are shorter than that of a conventional train (due to speed) and much shorter than the constant noises of a freeway. Thus, because the noises from a HST are less than that of existing transportation facilities in the corridor, and because of longer distances between the rail line and most sensitive land uses (residential, schools, hospitals), there are expected to be no noise/vibration impacts resulting from installation of the HST.

It should be noted that high speed trains operating on aerial structures will have higher noise impacts due to their high elevation and the lack of sound insulation from the ground itself. These structures are proposed to be located within Burbank under both alignment options and noise impacts could be higher than levels identified in the EIR/EIS, particularly with the higher aerial structures required for the second alignment option. Preferred mitigations for noise impacts include the installation of soundwalls and other sound-deadening devices.

Land Use Compatibility

Land Use compatibility impacts primarily involve the compatibility of a HST to existing land uses, including proximity to sensitive uses and the dividing of existing neighborhoods. Impacts in this category in Burbank are identified as being low due to the location of the HST line within the existing transportation corridor and its adjacency to industrial land uses. The Downtown Station option is shown to be compatible with local specific plans that encourage the development of transit facilities within the rail corridor and adjacent to existing train stations. For the "Combined UPRR/Metrolink & I-5 Alignment," where the proposed rail line would run adjacent to -- and possibly require demolition of -- residential structures on the west side of Interstate 5, impacts are identified as being high for these areas. Preferred mitigation strategies are not identified at the Program Level EIR stage. If the project were to go forward, individual station and alignment studies would evaluate impacts in greater detail and would develop potential mitigation measures.

Aesthetics and Visual Compatibility

The HST EIR/EIS addresses the issues of aesthetic and visual compatibility of the proposed HST project primarily with regard to its encroachment into nature areas, parks, and other natural or protected settings. Within an urban context such as

Burbank, the study does not particularly address visual and aesthetic impacts due to the project's location within an existing, industrial transportation corridor. However, because the project is proposed to be elevated through this section, there remains the possibility of visual impacts to surrounding areas, especially under the "Combined UPRR/Metrolink & I-5 Alignment" where the elevated structure is proposed to rise above existing overpasses at Burbank, Blvd., Magnolia Blvd., and Olive Ave. Existing commercial uses as well as planned residential uses in these areas would be visually impacted by a structure of this size. The EIR/EIS identifies coloring and the construction of bridges and structures that blend with the existing environment as the preferred mitigation strategy for impacts in this category.

EIR Comments

The public comment period for the California High Speed Train Draft EIR/EIS is ongoing and will close on May 15, 2004. During this comment period, effected jurisdictions, other related agencies, and members of the public are invited to submit comments on the findings and recommendations contained in the Draft EIR/EIS. Comments submitted by the deadline will be individually addressed by the California High Speed Rail Authority and included in the final report. Staff has identified the following preliminary issues and concerns that should be included in a comment letter to be sent to the California High Speed Rail Authority in response to the Draft EIR/EIS:

- Recommend the "Combined UPRR/Metrolink & I-5 Alignment" be removed from consideration due to its high impacts on established residential neighborhoods south of Olive Avenue and its high visual, aesthetic, and noise impacts due to the use of a 50-60 ft high elevated structure over existing freeway overpasses.
- Request that the Authority address and review errors in the traffic counts provided by staff to the EIR/EIS consultants. Address why this data is inconsistent with the city's current data and forecasts.
- Work closely with city staff to ensure that traffic impacts at proposed stations satisfy the city's traffic impact guidelines, and ensure that access improvements are planned to minimize impacts to local streets.
- If the Burbank Downtown Station is selected as the preferred alternative, emphasize and encourage pedestrian, bicycle, and transit connections to the City Center and existing transit facilities. If the Burbank Airport Station is selected as the preferred alternative, develop methods to connect to Burbank Airport, the existing Metrolink Station, and any other future transit stations that may be developed.
- Recommend that future studies of noise and vibration mitigate all "high" or "medium" impacts to "low" impacts, especially adjacent to residential neighborhoods, schools, parks and sensitive commercial businesses (such as sound recording studios, etc).

- Include planned railroad improvements and grade separations in the UPRR/Metrolink railroad in the list of future programmed improvements. Recommend that final rail alignment choices be compatible with these improvements.
- Include a more detailed description of the alignment characteristics through Burbank as it progresses from trench (outside of Burbank) to at-grade, to aerial, and back to at-grade under both alternatives. These alignment changes are closely spaced in one of the most constrained portions of the entire rail corridor, and must accommodate a number of existing structures. The alignment descriptions in the technical appendices are not clear exactly how this is accomplished within existing constraints.

Staff will continue to monitor progress on the project and return to Council for input and direction if the initial project funding is approved and specific alignment and station studies commence.

Recommendation

Staff requests that Council provide further direction as appropriate and direct staff to submit a comment letter to the Authority by the May 15, 2004 deadline.