

Officials Reject Plan for Tracks

L.A. council panel urges backers of high-speed project not to build near Taylor Yard park site.

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The quest to introduce a high-speed train across California hit another bump on Monday when Los Angeles City Council members told rail officials to avoid building tracks anywhere near the planned Taylor Yard State Park.

The park is being carved out of an old rail yard along the Los Angeles River, north of downtown. It is next to two routes being considered by the California High Speed Rail Authority.

On Monday, the City Council's River Committee passed a resolution urging the authority to look for other routes. But the resolution has no binding power.

In many ways, the dispute is more theoretical than real.

The High Speed Rail Authority, a state agency, was created in 1996 to study the concept of bullet trains traveling 220 mph running from downtown Los Angeles to downtown San Francisco. According to the plan, express trains could make the journey in 2 1/2 hours.

The obstacle will be paying for it. The cost of the project is estimated to be up to \$37 billion. A \$9.95-billion bond measure is scheduled for the statewide ballot in November 2006, but would also require the authority to find matching federal or private funds.

And, even then, rights of way would have to be acquired and significant engineering work done, because the high-speed rail line would largely require its own set of tracks, bridges and tunnels to avoid crossing roadways at grade level.

Earlier this year, the rail authority eliminated a route that would have tunneled under Elysian Park and emerged in the middle of the new Cornfields State Park, north of Chinatown.

Instead, the rail authority is clinging to two alternative routes near the Los Angeles River. One would be next to existing Metrolink tracks that border the west side of Taylor Yard. The other — and the one preferred by the authority — is to put tracks along San Fernando Road on the park's eastern border.

The San Fernando Road proposal, in particular, angers City Councilman Ed Reyes because it would sandwich Taylor Yard between the Metrolink and high-speed rail tracks and, Reyes said, make the new park inaccessible to the Latino communities it is intended to serve.

He also pointed out that the city had fought a similar battle before, persuading Metrolink and Union Pacific Railroad to move tracks to the western side of the proposed park in the early 1990s.

"I'm just here to tell you that we can't allow that on San Fernando Road," Reyes said during the testimony of Carrie Pourvahidi, the rail authority's deputy director.

Pourvahidi said later that the goal of the authority is to find an alignment that is as straight as possible, which would allow the trains to run faster. The San Fernando Road corridor is straight; the Metrolink route is curved. The rail authority says trains could run at speeds over 100 mph in the area.

Reyes has said that the train should follow the Golden State Freeway into downtown. But Pourvahidi said that route isn't workable because of its many curves.

Pourvahidi said that the rail authority now is trying to locate the general path of the train route and then pin down the specifics later.

"We've narrowed the route down to a corridor — that's all," Pourvahidi said. "I know the big fear is that we've gone far enough that there's no turning back. But there is so much more to do."

The High Speed Rail Authority ran into similar issues in Northern California when early plans called for the train to bisect 87,000-acre Henry W. Coe State Park in the mountains above the Santa Clara Valley. There, the authority relented and agreed to spare the park and study different routes.

Representatives of several activist groups on Monday urged the authority to do the same for Taylor Yard.

"We don't want it anywhere near the L.A. River," said Timothy Grabiell, an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council.