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

Josephine K. Hazelton-Boyle, PhD
Naomi Bick, PhD

CSUTC California State University Transportation Consortium

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16. Abstract Approved by California voters in 2008, the California High-Speed Rail (CAHSR) project is a planned 800-mile rail corridor across California aimed at delivering intercity passenger rail service to the state's largest metropolitan areas. This was the first voter-approved high-speed rail project in the United States and remains one of its most contentious. The first phase of the project's construction is currently underway in California's Central Valley, including many communities that initially opposed CAHSR. While supporters champion increased connectivity and the provision of environmentally sustainable transportation alternatives, critics contend the project's benefits will not outweigh its environmental costs and economic disruptions. This study examines how California's Central Valley cities and communities are preparing for and adapting to CAHSR construction and implementation through a content analysis of publicly available planning and policy documents with qualitative interviews with 17 local government administrators and other key officials. The findings reveal how Central Valley cities are planning for high-speed rail while also navigating conflicting economic, environmental, and community priorities to generate public support for the project. Implications for future implementation of passenger rail in car-centric locations with significant political and social opposition are discussed to offer further useful insights to support American mobility.			
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Mineta Transportation Institute
College of Business
San José State University
San José, CA 95192-0219

Email: mineta-institute@sjsu.edu

transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2538

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Executive Summary

Approved by California voters in 2008, the California High-Speed Rail (CAHSR) project represents the first voter-approved high-speed rail system in the United States and one of the most ambitious and contested transportation infrastructure projects in the US. While much of prior research and discussion has focused on statewide politics, costs, and system-level benefits, less attention has been given to how local governments in the Central Valley (where the first phase of construction is underway) are preparing for and adapting to project implementation. This study addresses that gap by examining how Central Valley cities and communities are responding to the opportunities and challenges associated with CAHSR.

The study explores the overarching research question: *How are California's Central Valley cities and communities preparing for and adapting to high-speed rail construction and implementation?* The study integrates a content analysis of publicly available planning and policy documents with qualitative interviews conducted with 17 expert officials working on CAHSR planning across the Central Valley.

The findings and lessons learned in this study highlight that implementation of CAHSR in the Central Valley is a political process and institutional challenge in addition to a significant technical and engineering project. Understanding the experiences of Central Valley communities planning for CAHSR reveals the importance of sustained collaboration and political support mechanisms that can mitigate controversy and advance the goals of the project. By examining how Central Valley communities are preparing for CAHSR, this research highlights lessons learned for future large passenger rail initiatives in regions with social opposition.

1. Introduction & Background Text

High-speed rail (HSR) has long been promoted globally as a means of enhancing intercity mobility, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and supporting more sustainable patterns of regional development (Banister & Givoni, 2013). Yet in the United States, passenger rail has played a limited role in regional mobility networks relative to automobile and air modes of travel (Williams et al., 2013). Additionally, large passenger rail investments have historically faced significant political, financial, and social challenges in the United States (Nieves, 2025). While the California High-Speed Rail (CAHSR) was approved by voters in 2008, it has also faced significant challenges and opposition as the first voter-approved high-speed rail system in the US and remains an ambitious attempt to implement HSR in heavily automobile-oriented locations (Yu & Kuang, 2025).

The federal government in the United States has historically funded and supported transportation initiatives and infrastructure throughout the country with cost sharing, grant conditions, and taxes (Gordon, 2005). Yet, as federal cost sharing with states and localities has decreased over time, states and localities have been left with filling in the gaps for needed infrastructure, updates, and innovation to transportation systems. Large partisan differences on topics such as transportation (Klein et al., 2022) continue to create hurdles for consistent funding initiatives from the federal government to the states. Particularly in the United States where the strength of the oil and gas industry, the automobile industry, and other opposing actors such as the Koch network have been hindrances to comprehensive transportation policy and climate change policy, these topics continue to be challenging to address (Karapin, 2020; Gibson & Brulle, 2024).

Yet, even with the uncertainty of future federal funding, California's HSR promises to address both climate change and transportation shortcomings in the state by eliminating the emissions of upwards of 400,000 vehicles (California High-Speed Rail Authority, 2024). This plan is tailored to California, which is a large and geographically diverse state and requires large-scale local government planning, regular road repairs, and statewide transportation initiatives that connect different corridors throughout the state (Schweikert et al., 2015). California has worked to create a climate change-specific transportation policy, particularly the mandate for public transit agencies in the state to move toward zero emissions vehicles (California Air Resources Board, 2019). However, less research has examined the way local governments are preparing for California's bold transportation initiatives, including the HSR project.

Planned as an approximately 800-mile rail corridor connecting California's largest metropolitan regions, CAHSR has been framed by proponents as a transformative infrastructure investment capable of reshaping mobility patterns in the state, advancing environmental sustainability, and

promoting economic development in station cities and across the state. At the same time, the project has faced evolving controversies primarily relating to escalating costs and projected ridership numbers as well as environmental and community impacts in areas affected by construction. These tensions have been particularly visible in California's Central Valley, where the first phase of construction is currently underway and where many communities have expressed strong opposition to the project.

As CAHSR moves from planning to implementation, the perspectives and actions of local officials in the Central Valley are becoming increasingly relevant. Cities and counties along the initial operating segment are actively contending with immediate construction-related disruptions while also working to anticipate and plan for longer-term economic, land use, and transportation impacts. Understanding how these local jurisdictions are preparing for and adapting to high-speed rail is critical for CAHSR's prospects and for informing future passenger rail investments in similar contexts.

This study addresses this overarching research question: *How are California's Central Valley cities and communities preparing for and adapting to CAHSR construction and implementation?* Additionally, this study examines two sub-topics: (1) how Central Valley cities along the HSR corridor are balancing economic, environmental, and community priorities and (2) how Central Valley communities are preparing for multi-modal connectivity with the CAHSR. To answer the research questions, this study combines a content analysis of publicly available planning and policy documents with qualitative interviews conducted with 17 key officials involved with CAHSR planning in the Central Valley. The findings from the study reveal the ways in which officials in the Central Valley are working to navigate political and community pressures as well as other evolving challenges to advance support for CAHSR in their communities. Additionally, the findings examine how CAHSR is viewed as a catalyst for other local transportation projects. The findings and implications offer insights and lessons learned for implementing passenger rail in car-centric regions with significant social and political opposition.

2. Methodology

To answer the research questions, the research utilized a two-part qualitative study consisting of content analysis and expert research interviews.

The first stage consisted of a systematic content analysis of publicly available planning and policy documents related to the CAHSR. The purpose of the content analysis was to understand how and what agencies are communicating about CAHSR to the public they serve. Transportation planning and policy documents for cities, counties, and Councils of Governments were electronically retrieved. The documents were uploaded and analyzed using qualitative coding software. The documents were initially skimmed in their entirety to hone in on all sections relevant to this study. The documents were coded as they pertain to the research questions. Most importantly, the content analysis helped to identify potential interviewees and inform questions for the interviews in the second stage.

The second stage of the research process involved a series of expert semi-structured interviews with key public officials working on CAHSR planning and decision-making in the Central Valley. The interviews occurred using the Zoom video conferencing platform. The semi-structured nature involved using some questions for all participants, while allowing additional questions to be developed based on the individual participant's organization, role with CAHSR planning, and relevant information that emerged during the content analysis process. Interviews were with high-ranking officials working on planning around each of the eight CAHSR stations in the Central Valley. A total of 17 interviewees participated, and the goal for each interview was to understand the challenges, constraints, and lessons learned from working in CAHSR planning. Interviewees worked in key positions in public works, planning, city management, and economic development. Additionally, interviews occurred with administrators employed by the California High Speed Rail Authority whose work focused on the Central Valley planning, the San Joaquin Joint Powers Authority, and two key nonprofit organizations. The Zoom platform provided initial AI-generated transcripts of the interviews. Researchers cleaned the transcripts while listening back to the audio recordings to ensure accurate transcription.

Due to the focused geographic location and the highly politicized nature of CAHSR, participants were guaranteed a high degree of confidentiality to promote openness and honesty during the interviews. The interviewees were also provided with informed consent, and the interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed. See Appendix A for the interview protocol containing the informed consent language and the semi-structured interview guide. To further maintain the trustworthiness of the findings, several methods were used. During the interviews, follow-up questions were asked to clarify details to promote accuracy. Additionally, researchers presented key themes to interviewees to solicit feedback and validate the interpretation of major themes.

Additionally, the data was triangulated to ensure multiple sources were used to arrive at the major findings' themes.

The primary researchers analyzed the data and frequently met to discuss the coding scheme as well as the interpretation and meaning of the themes. Discrepancies were discussed among the two researchers until mutual agreement, and a resolution was reached. Data analysis involved coding the documents and interview transcripts with the qualitative coding software, Dedoose. Documents were re-coded as needed to ensure consistency throughout the coding process. The goal of the active coding process was to become close to the data to understand the complexities and nuances while deriving meaning (Saldana, 2015). A directed coding method was used which involved developing codes based on the guiding research questions and prior literature. The primary and sub-codes were based on conceptual themes with the purpose of establishing connections across the data.

3. Key Findings

Overall, the data suggests that the CAHSR is viewed as promising for the Central Valley. Secondary documents and interview participants frequently discussed how the CAHSR brings the potential for a variety of economic, mobility, and sustainability benefits for the Central Valley as well as California more broadly. One interviewee expressed that "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." Another interviewee described the potential mobility benefits as the following:

> In my opinion it's an effective way to reduce VMT and greenhouse gas emissions, so it is an alternative to traditional vehicle-based travel. I think it does a good job of filling that mid-length trip, you know, where people drive, but it's a little too close for a plane…I think it's just an effective mode of transportation for those that have used high-speed rail…it's more efficient.

Interview participants frequently discussed the political pressures surrounding the CAHSR project as detailed in the following sub-section. However, the overarching belief in the promise of the CAHSR for the Valley was credited as helping to manage political differences:

> It was always going to be quite an expensive project, but I think that what has, frankly, kept this project alive, is that potential. The understanding of this could be revolutionary especially for Central Valley cities. It's why you've seen Republican Mayors of Fresno support the project, Ashley Swearengin and now Jerry Dyer, both of them prominent Republicans, both of them support the project, because that is how impactful it can be on Fresno's future. So, frankly I think that's really the thing that's keeping this going, is that [there's] an opportunity that I think a lot of people do see.

3.1 Balancing Political Pressures

Although administrators participating in the study reported that they view the CAHSR project as promising for the Central Valley, they recognized that it has been heavily politicized, at least in part because some community members are skeptical about the Central Valley benefitting from the project. One interviewee characterized the public perception of some in the community in the following way:

> Here's a facility that is going to primarily benefit Southern California and Northern California and the six million people in the middle, in the San Joaquin Valley, are seeing the bulk of the impact, at least for the initial infrastructure investment. And so that helps build the political divide in the project.

Additionally, one interviewee stated the following, recalling the historical tensions in the Central Valley around the CAHSR:

> [The County] sort of has a history with high-speed rail, there were lawsuits…so I arrived after all of those things, but that was sort of the baseline feeling…I think there's political reasons or whatever, I think there's skepticism in the community to some extent about high-speed rail, generally how effective it's going to be…

In discussing the politicization, interviewees frequently attributed the opposition in their Central Valley communities to an underlying fear of change. In describing the perceptions of local elected officials in the community who are opposed to the CAHSR, one interviewee said the following:

There's a sense that High-Speed Rail could bring sort of urbanization, like, they envision high-rises and things like that…I almost am trying to convince them that like, hey for transit-oriented development to work, you do need density. It can't just be single-family homes and strip malls. That doesn't work, you know.

Change in the community brings about a fear of the unknown as pinpointed by the following interviewee:

> So, there is a lot of skepticism there, and I think it's just because honestly TODs in my view don't exist in the Central Valley, for the most part. Like the concept of a transit-oriented development is almost non-existent. Maybe Fresno's a slight exception, but it's non-existent, so there's nothing to point to as nearby that's sort of successful. And so, I think it's hard for people to grasp sometimes if they haven't seen it.

Administrators also described how they view their role in addressing politicism and skepticism. They described embracing the perspective that it is important to communicate about the benefits of CAHSR to the community while also explaining that their role is to actively plan ahead, anticipating CAHSR rather than having to retroactively catch up later:

> From a staff perspective, [our perspective] has sort of been like, well, regardless of whether or not you think it's going to happen or not going to happen, certainly we should plan in case it does happen, right? We wouldn't want to be on our back food, this thing springs up overnight, and we don't have a plan in place… Let's try to figure out if this were to happen, how would we like it to look? So, that's been sort of the staff perspective, and I think it's been somewhat helpful and effective, because it does paint it in a context where it sort of removes what your personal feelings might be about High-Speed Rail.

3.2 CAHSR as the Catalyst for Transportation Projects and Economic Development

The secondary documents and interviewees frequently described CAHSR as the catalyst for other transportation projects and economic development. Interviewees stated that the expected benefits of the CAHSR are helping to serve as momentum for a range of other transportation projects. The types of local and regional transportation projects identified in this study that are a result of the CAHSR include transit-oriented development around CAHSR stations, the Cross-Valley Corridor, potential bus rapid transit lines, improvements to existing bus networks, bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, feasibility studies for rail projects in Fresno, and roadway and highway safety improvements. Interviewees explained that the funding and political support for these projects would not be feasible without the prospect of HSR. Additionally, the CAHSR is needed to support the mobility network that many of the other transportation projects anticipate.

One interviewee captured these sentiments by explaining the following:

> Something that many people don't realize 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? If high-speed rail doesn't happen, I can tell you right now that [Fresno] light rail project really has no leg to stand on. It needs a centralized transportation hub, like the downtown high-speed rail station is gonna provide in order to pencil out the ridership necessary to invest in that kind of transportation project.

In describing recent feasibility studies for local transportation projects, one interviewee stated the following:

> So, those are two studies that I envision we really are going to, you know, look at high-speed rail as really the impetus of why those potential systems could be in place in the future.

Similarly, CAHSR is viewed as key to economic development efforts. Particularly in cities with stations in downtown locations, the prospect of CAHSR is guiding efforts to improve economic activity around stations. As described by the following interviewee, efforts to enhance the economic conditions in their downtown are occurring in part to help support CAHSR rail ridership:

> Well, I often find myself saying, you know conversations, forums…the question often comes up as what will high speed rail drive in terms of retail, or how are people investing because of high-speed rail? I think the reality is kind of the reverse…. [An] economically thriving downtown is gonna make people want to ride high-speed rail, have a reason to ride high-speed rail more.

Others shared similar sentiments that the potential economic benefits will not only benefit localities but also the state overall.

4. Summary & Conclusions

In analyzing public documents related to CAHSR planning and conducting 17 expert interviews, the data reveal several important lessons learned that are relevant for implementing large and innovative rail projects, particularly in automobile-centric areas with significant politicization and social opposition. The lessons learned are as follows:

1. One lesson learned is the importance of place-specific knowledge rather than standardized and externally-derived planning narratives. Multiple interviewees from local governments described experiences working with consulting groups that lack an understanding about the Central Valley. The interviewees stated that consultants frequently used examples of reference photos in larger urban areas outside of the Central Valley during meetings with the public, such as community engagement sessions, that the public found off-putting. These were perceived by residents as disconnected from local realities and values in the Central Valley, which reinforced some of the politicization and skepticism of the project.
2. Another important lesson learned is that genuine, ongoing, and transparent collaboration and coordination can make or break the project's success. Interviewees frequently identified collaboration and interagency coordination as a decisive factor in shaping CAHSR progress in local communities. The strength of the collaboration and coordination has changed over time given the length of CAHSR planning efforts and the changing of decision-makers involved. Successful coordination efforts between the Rail Authority, regional transportation bodies, and local governments were credited with streamlining decision-making and reducing uncertainty. However, examples of poor collaboration, coordination, and communication were described by some participants and credited with eroding trust and legitimacy in the project.
3. In areas of the Central Valley where the CAHSR has been most politicized, interviewees described how a series of early missteps led to greater politicization that was difficult to overcome. The highlighted lesson learned for large long-term infrastructure projects is that early interactions with local communities can have long-lasting political consequences. Additionally, perceived or actual threats to transparency and responsiveness early on may permanently shape the public's attitudes toward the project.
4. Interviewees emphasized that sustained support from elected officials can be helpful to advancing the CAHSR at the local level, yet maintaining that support over time has sometimes been challenging, particularly through various election cycles. One lesson

learned is that future large infrastructure projects should think strategically about institutionalizing support beyond individual elected officials.

5. In order for some of the economic benefits to come to fruition, private investment is needed. Both the planning documents and interviewees mentioned the importance of private investment for the project's success. Interviewees noted that questions remaining surrounding private investment can complicate planning decisions at times. The lesson learned is that financing questions surrounding large infrastructure projects should be clearly addressed and as soon as possible to best leverage the strengths and abilities of communities to plan for the project. The additional certainty will help to guide planning efforts.

Together, these lessons highlight that implementation of the CAHSR in the Central Valley is not only a significant technical engineering project, but also a political process and institutional challenge. Understanding the experiences of Central Valley communities planning for the CAHSR reveals the importance of sustained collaboration and political support mechanisms that can mitigate controversy and advance the goals of the project. By examining how Central Valley communities are preparing for the CAHSR, this research highlights lessons learned for future large passenger rail initiatives in regions with social opposition.

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About the Authors

JOSEPHINE K. HAZELTON-BOYLE, PHD

Dr. Josephine Hazelton-Boyle is an Assistant Professor of Public Administration at California State University, Fresno (Fresno State) and a Faculty Fellow with the Fresno State Transportation Institute. Her research broadly focuses on how transportation organizations are advancing non-vehicular transportation options. She is also interested in how transportation organizations navigate issues related to politicization and fairness. Her research largely draws from the lived experiences of transportation administrators to explore these topics. Dr. Hazelton-Boyle currently serves as the Chair for the American Society for Public Administration's Section on Transportation Policy and Administration. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

NAOMI BICK, PHD

Dr. Naomi Bick is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at California State University, Fresno and is the University's Master of Public Administration program coordinator. Her research focuses on public policy, with an emphasis on climate change, urban politics, and transportation. She is also interested in the intersection between environmental policy and transportation policy, particularly at the local, regional, and state levels. Her research utilizes qualitative and quantitative approaches. She has previously served as a Fresno State Transportation Institute Faculty Fellow. She received her Ph.D. from Western Michigan University in 2021

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