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## I-205 alignment possible for Valley Link

By Bob Brownne

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The Tracy City Council on Tuesday considered the possibility that the Valley Link train could end up bypassing downtown Tracy, where the long-anticipated commuter rail service was expected to be a key component of the downtown's future development.

Tracy senior planner Scott Claar reported that the San Joaquin Council of Governments and the California Department of Transportation have been working on Caltrans' "Managed Lane Project," which would allow various configurations for controlling the flow of traffic along Interstate 205 during commute hours.

In addition to plans for high-occupancy vehicle lanes, bus-only lanes and reversible lanes, the proposal also calls for a 60-foot-wide median that could accommodate a rail line for nearly 14 miles between Interstate 5 and the Grant Line Road interchange on Interstate 580 just west of the Alameda County line.

Kevin Sheridan, deputy executive director of the Tri-Valley/San Joaquin Valley Regional Rail Authority, showed the council the proposal, and said that an environmental review – which would be a supplement to a final environmental impact report released in April – could take about two years to complete, assuming that work begins in January.

The council's concern was what it could mean for the transit-oriented development (TOD) plan currently under way for the downtown. For more than two years now the city and consultant De Novo Planning Group of El Dorado Hills have been working on a specific plan that that would outline how the city's downtown would develop, with the Tracy Transit Station at Central Avenue and Sixth Street the centerpiece of the plan.

The council unanimously agreed that the plan for a downtown should still be the priority whether it includes transit-oriented development or not, and also agreed to consider options for a Valley Link station along Interstate 205.

The council had also considered, and rejected, a wait-and-see approach that would put the current downtown planning process on hold until SJCOG, Caltrans and Valley Link decide if the Interstate 205 alignment would be preferred over the current plan, which has the commuter line's Tracy stop at the Tracy Transit Station.

Sheridan pointed out that transit-oriented development, including residential and commercial development, is desired around stations along the Valley Link route. That could include transit connections between a downtown station and an I-205 station.

He also noted that because the interstates are part of federal highway system, the environmental reviews would be done to comply with federal rules. That also would make the project eligible for federal funding, including a share of the \$1 trillion infrastructure bill signed by President Joe Biden on Monday.

“Currently there's about \$740 million that's encumbered for the project. For the initial operating segment between the Dublin BART and Mountain House we are looking at a number, minus the trains, of about \$1.4 billion, and once again, these are estimates today that we're looking at,” Sheridan told the council. “When you have \$740 million to leverage other federal funds it's very attractive on those grant applications that we will be submitting.”

During the public comment the council heard from advocates of the downtown, who urged the council to stay with the plan that has already been set in motion. Dino Margaros, president of Tracy City Center Association, told the council to keep in mind that Sheridan's presentation is still a proposal at this point.

“Nothing has been changed. Nothing is forcibly going to be changed. He's told us this might happen, we have an option to, etc., etc.,” Margaros said. “There's no reason to stop anything right now.”

“This is funded. City staff is working on it. We need to have a plan for the downtown. We cannot get there from here without that plan. It doesn’t matter about the train. Take the train out of the equation and we still need a downtown specific plan, period.

“I’m asking you to please just go forward with the plan we’ve got right now. Everything’s been in motion. If something changes, we address it then, but there’s nothing precluding Tracy from having multiple TODs or multiple specific plans. It happens all the time. The transit station was purpose-built for this, a \$14 million facility sitting there not being used to its full potential.”

Tracy Interim Development Service Director Bill Dean urged the council to participate in the process that Sheridan outlined and said the downtown plan could continue regardless of what happens with the Interstate 205 plan.

Councilman Dan Arriola said that the council is really considering two separate matters: support of Valley Link’s latest proposal and continuing with a plan the council has already started. He added that a transit-oriented development, be it downtown or along Interstate 205, will still require a public process and city council involvement.

“We should have a plan for each of these alternatives. That is what smart growth is. The ultimate layout may not technically be up to us. It may be up to an independent JPA (joint powers agency) but we should be prepared. We should be prepared if it goes to 205 and we should be prepared if it goes to downtown.”

Councilwoman Eleassia Davis said that she has always supported Valley Link regardless of where the stations go, but through the whole process Tracy’s downtown was considered as the local stop for the commuter rail line.

“I feel we had already fought and advocated for Valley Link coming downtown, as so I’m disheartened, and I feel like most of the community – I don’t want to use bait-and-switch, but I do feel a little bit bamboozled – because everything was about a downtown station. Everything,” said Davis.

Sheridan replied that Valley Link isn't trying to change the city's plan, but federal rules under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) require that local agencies consider a variety of alternatives in light of SJCOG and Caltrans advocating for the Managed Lanes Project, with a rail component a possible feature of that project.

"NEPA requires all alternatives that are viable to be looked at," he said. "There's a separate process now that has to take place."

Mayor Pro Tem Veronica Vargas, who also the chair of the Valley Link board of directors, also urged the council to continue with the downtown plan.

"We have options ... that allow us to be flexible, to be proactive, to diversify and be ready for the opportunity when the opportunity presents itself."

Mayor Nancy Young said that any decisions on how the city will interface with the Managed Lane Project, should Valley Link align with that project, are still in the future.

"These are options, these are opportunities that will come before us later. I think we're getting caught up on trying to make that final decision. It's not the final decision and it's our job to evaluate and make sure we're presenting the information clearly to the community," said Young.

- Contact Bob Brownne at [brownne@tracypress.com](mailto:brownne@tracypress.com), or call 209-830-4227.