

NOTICE OF AVAILABILITY OF A DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

Merced Intermodal Track Connection Project

PUBLIC REVIEW PERIOD: JULY 17, 2024 – AUGUST 31, 2024

DATE: July 17, 2024
TO: Agencies, Organizations, and Interested Parties
FROM: San Joaquin Joint Powers Authority
SUBJECT: Notice of Availability of a Draft Environmental Impact Report (Draft EIR) for the Merced Intermodal Track Connection Project

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the San Joaquin Joint Powers Authority (SJJPA), acting as lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), has prepared a Draft EIR for the Merced Intermodal Track Connection Project (Project).

A. Project Description

The Project would include a new track connection from the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) corridor to the proposed integrated Merced High-Speed Rail (HSR) Station in downtown Merced between O and R Streets, in addition to a new platform that would allow for cross-platform transfer between the San Joaquins passenger rail and HSR. The Project only includes the construction of the track connection; it does not include the construction of the proposed integrated Merced HSR Station.

As shown in Figure 1, the Project would consist of the following:

- New passenger rail connection for the San Joaquins from BNSF north of State Route (SR) 59 to the southern terminus at the proposed integrated Merced HSR Station
- New aerial guideway that would connect into the east side of the HSR platform (which would be shared with the San Joaquins) at the proposed integrated Merced HSR Station, creating an elevated integrated platform with HSR
- Modification of the approved Altamont Corridor Express (ACE) Merced Layover and Maintenance Facility

In addition to the Project, SJJPA has identified three variants that assume different approaches for fueling future hydrogen-powered trains in response to the state's zero emission goals: Variant H1: On-Site Green Hydrogen Production and Green Hydrogen Transported via Rail, Variant H2: Off-Site Green or Grey Hydrogen Transported via Truck, and Variant H3: Off-site Green or Grey Hydrogen Transported via Rail. The variants would primarily occur in the same environmental footprint as the Project¹ and have the same objectives, background, and development controls, but with specific differences. The variants are a slightly different version of the Project in the event SJJPA desires to consider them for approval. The final decision as to whether to adopt the Project, a variant, and/or an alternative will be made after completion of the final EIR for this Project.

¹ Variant H1 would have additional footprint requirements for solar panels that are beyond the environmental footprint of the Project.

B. Project Location

Figure 1 shows the limits of the Project, which are in Merced County and almost entirely within the city limits of Merced. A small portion of the limits of the Project near Ashby Road and Miles Court is outside the city limits of Merced within Merced County. The new track for the Project would run from the BNSF corridor just north of where it crosses Snelling Highway (SR 59) to a station platform at the proposed integrated Merced HSR Station located between O and R Streets in downtown Merced, parallel to 16th Street.

C. Alternatives

The following two alternatives are analyzed in the EIR:

- **No Project Alternative.** The No Project Alternative is provided in this EIR to compare the impacts of the Project with what would be reasonably expected to occur in the foreseeable future if the Project were not approved and no additional construction would occur within the Project corridor (CEQA Guidelines Section 15126.6 [e][2]).
- **North of SR 59 BNSF/Downtown Connection Alternative.** This alternative would move the proposed connection from the BNSF corridor to the UPRR corridor, farther north of downtown Merced compared to the proposed connection along Snelling Highway. New track would be constructed through agricultural land and apparent Franklin County Water District wastewater treatment ponds east of Drake Ave on a north-south alignment with a new bridge over Fahrens Creek leading to the western part of the business park. Within the southern portion of the approved ACE Merced Layover and Maintenance Facility, the alignment would follow the curve of Ashby Road, cross over SR 99 and the UPRR corridor near Miles Court, and then run parallel to the UPRR tracks as it approaches downtown Merced. The alignment would transition from an at-grade alignment to an aerial guideway as it curves around Ashby Road so that it is aerial when it crosses SR 99 and UPRR tracks and then continuing to the east side of the HSR platform at the proposed integrated Merced HSR Station, similar to the Project. With this alternative, access to the approved ACE Layover and Maintenance Facility would change compared to the Project because there would be no relocated ACE/UPRR industrial spur track along SR 59 and the access line would terminate up near the BNSF/San Joaquins line instead of finishing that curve and heading towards SR 59. This alternative would have the same improvements to the approved ACE Layover and Maintenance Facility as the Project. This alternative would have the same operational service level and similar levels of ridership as the Project.

Other alternatives were considered but were dismissed from further evaluation for the reasons presented in the EIR.

D. Potential Environmental Impacts

The Draft EIR analyzes the construction impacts, operational impacts, and cumulative impacts for each resource area.

Impacts related to the following topics would remain significant and unavoidable with the implementation of mitigation.

- **Construction Noise.** Construction work could occur during the nighttime. Even with implementation of Mitigation Measure NOI-1.1: Implement a Construction Noise Control Plan, the impact of temporary construction-related noise on nearby noise sensitive receptors could be a significant and unavoidable impact during construction of the Project, in particular where heavy construction would occur at night near residences.
- **Cumulative Construction Noise.** The potential exists for a significant cumulative noise impact to occur during construction because there could be other cumulative projects simultaneously under construction adjacent to the Project. Even with implementation of Mitigation Measure NOI-1.1: Implement a Construction Noise Control Plan, noise impacts would not necessarily be reduced at all times during construction to a less-than-significant level, particularly with the likelihood of substantial nighttime construction for the Project. Because there could be other cumulative projects simultaneously under construction adjacent to the Project, the Project could result in a considerable contribution to a cumulative noise impact during construction.

The Project would result in significant or potentially significant impacts without implementation of mitigation measures for the following topics: aesthetics (Variant H1); biological resources; cultural resources; tribal cultural resources; geology, soils, seismicity, and paleontological resources; hazards and hazardous materials; hydrology and water quality; land use and planning; construction noise and vibration; public services and utilities and service systems; safety and security; and transportation.

The Project would result in less-than-significant impacts with implementation of the mitigation measures recommended in this EIR for the following topics: aesthetics (Variant H1); biological resources; cultural resources; tribal cultural resources; geology, soils, seismicity, and paleontological resources; hazards and hazardous materials; hydrology and water quality; land use and planning; construction vibration; public services and utilities and service systems; safety and security; and transportation.

The Project would result in less-than-significant impacts for the following topics and no mitigation measures would be required: mineral resources, aesthetics (Project, Variant H2, Variant H3), air quality and greenhouse gas emissions, energy, operational noise and vibration, and recreation.

The Project would result in no impact for the following environmental topics: agricultural and forestry resources, population and housing, and wildfire.

E. Hazardous Waste Sites

Portions of the Project are located on or in close proximity to areas with hazardous materials contamination compiled pursuant to Government Code Section 65962.5 (Cortese List).

F. Availability of Draft Environmental Impact Report

The Draft EIR and the documents incorporated by reference are available on the Project webpage (<https://sjjpa.com/mitc/>). A printed copy of the Draft EIR and the documents incorporated by reference are available for public viewing at the SJJPA offices at 949 East Channel Street in Stockton, California during normal office hours (Monday through Friday 4:00 a.m. to 8:45 p.m.). Electronic versions of the Draft EIR are

available upon request at the SJJPA offices as well. In addition, a printed copy of the Draft EIR is also available for public viewing at the following locations:

- City of Merced, City Clerk's Office
678 West 18th Street, 1st Floor
Merced, CA 95340
Office hours: Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
(closed during the 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m. lunch hour)
- Merced County Library
2100 O Street
Merced, CA 95340
Library hours: Monday from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Tuesday and Wednesday from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., Thursday from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and Friday and Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
(electronic versions of the Draft EIR are also available upon request at this location)

G. Open House Meeting

SJJPA will hold one open house meeting to provide information about the Draft EIR and respond to general questions about the environmental analysis. A presentation summarizing the Project and the Draft EIR will be provided, and staff will be available to answer questions of a general nature. All formal comments on the Draft EIR must be submitted in writing or verbally to a court reporter at the open house meeting or via mail or email (see below for details) for consideration.

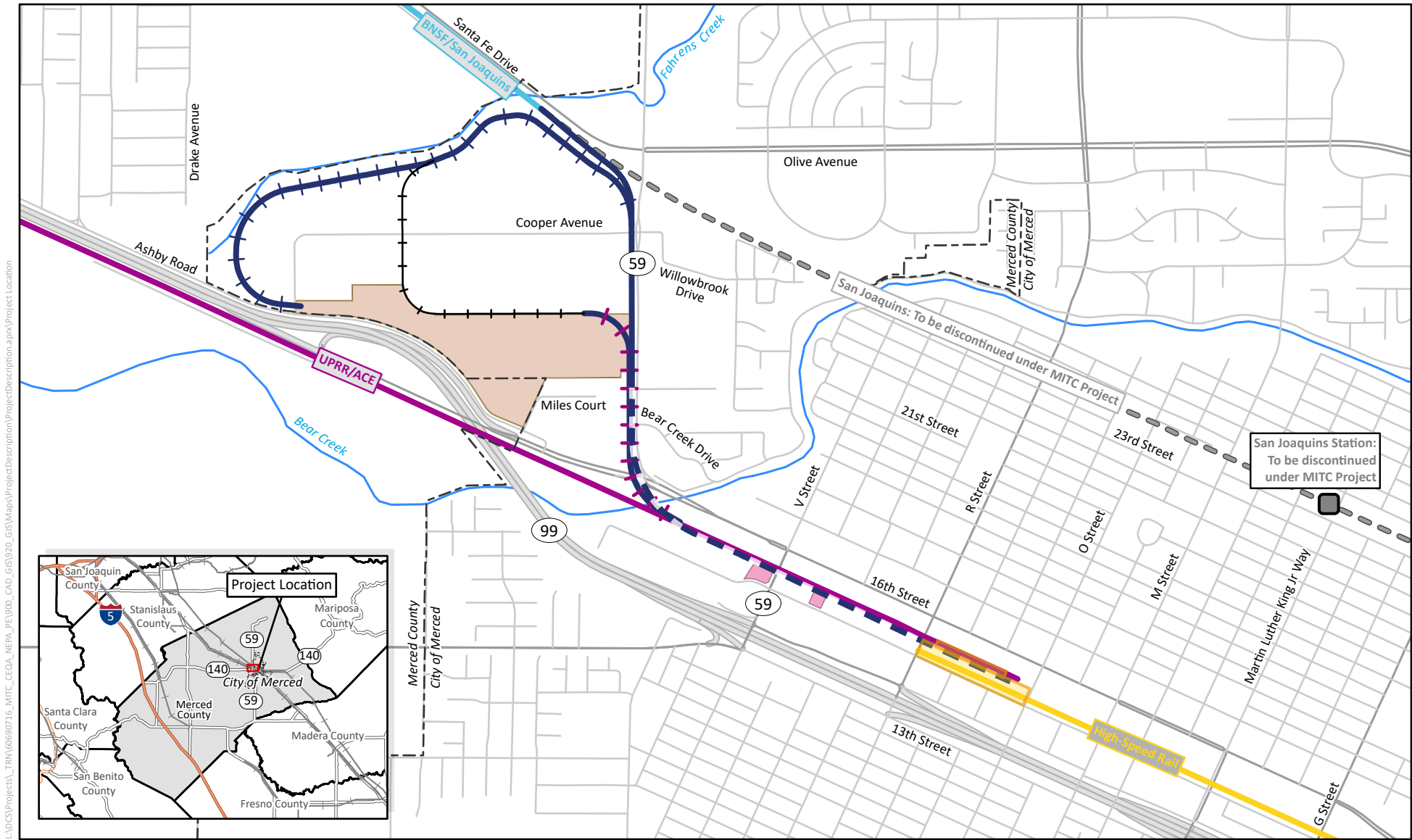
- **Thursday, August 1, 2024, from 6:00 pm – 8:00 pm at the Merced Senior Community Center**
(755 West 15th Street, Merced, CA 95340)

Information about attending the open house meeting is available on the Project webpage (<https://sjjpa.com/mitc/>). Visit the Project webpage to sign up to receive email reminders for the meeting.

H. Comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Report

Comments on this Draft EIR must be received by SJJPA no later than 5:00 p.m. on the last day of the Draft EIR public review period (August 31, 2024), and can be submitted by any of the following methods:

- **Mail:** San Joaquin Joint Powers Authority
Attn: MITC Project
949 East Channel Street
Stockton, CA 95202
- **Email:** Information@MITCProject.org; please include "MITC Project" in the subject line.



- Existing UPRR/Approved ACE
- Proposed High-Speed Rail
- Existing BNSF/San Joaquins
- UPRR Industrial Spur Track
- City of Merced Boundary
- Proposed Integrated Merced High-Speed Rail Station
- Approved ACE Merced Layover and Maintenance Facility

- MITC Project**
- San Joaquins: Elevated Track
 - San Joaquins: At-grade Track
 - MITC San Joaquins Layover and Maintenance Access Line
 - Relocated ACE/UPRR Industrial Spur Track
 - San Joaquins: To Be Discontinued under MITC Project
 - Proposed Parking Facilities

Figure 1
Project Location
 Merced Intermodal Track Connection Project

