

6.1 Scoping Meetings and Noticing

As described in Section 1.7, *Scope and Content of this Environmental Impact Report*, the scoping process for this environmental impact report (EIR) was formally initiated on May 28, 2020, when the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission (SJRRC) submitted a Notice of Preparation (NOP) to the California State Clearinghouse; federal, regional, and local elected officials; federal, state, and local agencies, including the planning and community development directors in Stanislaus County, Merced County, and the cities where the Project would be located; and the interested public. The purpose of the NOP is to solicit participation from relevant agencies and from the public in determining the scope of an EIR. The scoping period ended July 7, 2020.

Three virtual public scoping meetings were held during the scoping period. In accordance with social distancing guidance related to the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), all scoping meetings for the Project were held online as webinars. Two were held on June 25, 2020, and one was held on June 30, 2020. Appendix A, *ACE Ceres-Merced Extension Scoping Memorandum*, contains the scoping report detailing the scoping process, including the notification, and scoping activities undertaken. Written comments received during the scoping process are also included in Appendix A.

6.2 Consultation and Coordination

The process of identifying proposed facilities and alternatives for the Proposed Project was initiated in 2013, as the extension to Ceres and Merced was part of the suite of improvements identified in *ACEforward*. *ACEforward* also studied plans to modernize the existing Altamont Corridor Express (ACE) service that would result in faster intercity and commuter train services and could establish a connection between the San Joaquin Valley and San Jose within a 10-year timeframe. An NOP was issued in June 2013 to initiate the prior environmental process for *ACEforward* (State Clearinghouse #2013062059). During the planning process for *ACEforward*, SJRRC held meetings with: (1) local agencies, organizations, and stakeholders identified along the Project corridor; (2) the Central Valley Rail Working Group; and (3) resource agencies to address local issues and identify potential alternatives to be considered for the Project. A comprehensive stakeholder database was created and maintained, and stakeholders received email updates throughout the planning process.

Through the *ACEforward* project development and environmental review, substantial financial, environmental, and logistical challenges were identified with some of the improvements necessary to increase ACE service levels to San Jose, as well as the need to coordinate potential improvements with other regional rail services and planning. In addition, SJRRC ridership studies showed that expansion to Ceres and Merced would provide substantial increases in ACE ridership without the financial, logistical, and environmental challenges of some of the improvements necessary to increase service levels to San Jose. As a result, the feasible and fundable extensions of service in the Central Valley became the focus of SJRRC vision for ACE expansion in the near-term. Additionally, SJRRC decided not to proceed with the *ACEforward* project and rescinded the prior *ACEforward* NOP

1 and Draft EIR, and rather moved forward with the preparation of a new EIR for an extension of ACE
2 service to Ceres and then Merced.

3 The new focus on ACE expansion in the Central Valley led to the preparation by SJRRC of the *ACE*
4 *Extension Lathrop to Ceres/Merced EIR* (Prior EIR) in 2017–2018, which analyzed the environmental
5 impacts associated with the phased improvement plan to extend ACE service to Manteca, Modesto,
6 Ceres, Turlock, and Merced. The Prior EIR analyzed a Phase I extension from Lathrop to Ceres at a
7 project-level detail and Phase II extension from Ceres to Merced at a programmatic level of detail.
8 The Prior EIR was certified and Phase I was approved by the SJRRC Board of Commissioners on
9 August 3, 2018. The extension to Ceres is currently in the engineering design and permitting phase
10 and is anticipated to start construction in fall of 2021. Public and stakeholder outreach for the Prior
11 EIR, including comments on the NOP and comments on the Prior EIR were reviewed during the
12 preparation of the Prior EIR and provided guidance in the development of the ACE Ceres–Merced
13 Extension Project (Project).

14 The Project, for which this Draft EIR is being prepared, is Phase II of the extension of ACE to Merced.
15 The alternatives analysis process for this Draft EIR utilized preliminary planning and
16 environmental/engineering information to identify feasible and practicable alternatives to carry
17 forward for environmental review and preliminary engineering. Chapter 2, *Project Description* and
18 Chapter 5, *Alternatives* describe the alternatives considered, the evaluation criteria that were
19 applied and used to determine which alternatives to analyze in this Draft EIR, and which
20 alternatives were considered but rejected for further analysis.

21 In addition to consultation and coordination meetings, the Project webpage
22 (<https://acerail.com/merced-extension-eir/>) was developed within the SJRRC website. This
23 webpage contained the most current announcements and informational materials.

24 Appendix M, *Public and Agency Coordination* provides a list of local and regional agencies,
25 community organizations, and stakeholders with whom SJRRC has met throughout the development
26 of the Project, including meetings from the *ACEforward* effort and the Prior EIR, as well as meeting
27 held during the time period that this Draft EIR was developed. Meeting dates and topics presented
28 during these meetings are provided.

29 **6.2.1 Local Agency, Community, and Stakeholder Meetings**

30 Numerous meetings and presentations were conducted with local and regional agencies, community
31 organizations, and stakeholders since the start of the planning process in 2013 and during the
32 development of the Project. This includes meetings with cities and counties along the existing and
33 extended ACE corridor; councils of governments; the SJRRC Board; other transportation agencies;
34 and local organizations, such as chambers of commerce, political organizations, religious groups,
35 community groups, and professional networks.

36 Refinements to the Project alignment and station options have been developed through
37 communication with stakeholders, local governments, and the public. Additional meetings with local
38 elected officials, city and county staff, leaders, businesses, organizations, agencies, and the public
39 were conducted to disseminate information and receive input on the planning process for the
40 Project. Appendix M presents a complete list of these meetings.

6.2.2 Central Valley Rail Working Group Meetings

The Central Valley Working Group consists of representatives of local and regional transit agencies and elected officials and staff of counties and cities along the existing and extended ACE corridor. The Central Valley Working Group advises on the planning, design, and environmental review of the ACE Extension and engages in the following activities.

- Partner with SJRRC throughout the ACE Extension development process.
- Provide guidance on local issues, development plans, and policies.
- Assist in developing and evaluating alternatives.
- Develop consensus regarding ACE Extension goals, objectives, and major elements.
- Participate in public involvement activities and events.
- Act as liaisons to local communities.

The Central Valley Working Group is comprised of the following members.

- County of Sacramento
- City of Sacramento
- City of Elk Grove
- City of Galt
- Sacramento Area Council of Governments
- Sacramento Regional Transit District
- County of San Joaquin
- City of Lodi
- City of Stockton
- City of Manteca
- San Joaquin Council of Governments
- SJRRC
- San Joaquin Regional Transit District
- County of Stanislaus
- City of Modesto
- City of Turlock
- Stanislaus Council of Governments
- County of Merced
- City of Merced
- Merced County Association of Governments

The Central Valley Working Group has been instrumental in guiding the development of the initial set of alternatives and refining the alternatives for environmental analysis. Central Valley Working

1 Group meetings were conducted on August 22, 2013; February 28, 2014; August 22, 2014; May 29,
2 2015; April 8, 2016; September 23, 2016; December 16, 2016; February 24, 2017; June 23, 2017;
3 October 27, 2017; and February 23, 2018. Feedback from these meetings was used in the
4 development of the extension of ACE service to Merced as part of the *ACEforward* effort and the
5 Prior EIR. During the current effort to develop the project-level EIR for ACE Ceres-Merced Extension
6 Project, which began in February 2020, additional Central Valley Rail Working Group meetings have
7 been conducted to update key stakeholders in the Central Valley and to seek input. These meetings
8 took place on February 7, 2020; September 18, 2020; and February 26, 2021.

9 **6.2.3 Resource Agency Meetings**

10 SJRRC will be consulting with federal and state resource agencies prior to construction and prior to
11 obtaining permits and approvals from applicable federal and state resource agencies. Table 2-16 in
12 Chapter 2, *Project Description* provides a list of resource agencies permits and approvals that could
13 be required for the Proposed Project and with whom SJRRC will consult regarding potential impacts
14 on resources of concern.

15 **6.3 Notification and Circulation of Draft EIR**

16 The California Environmental Quality Act requires the lead agency (SJRRC) to prepare an EIR that
17 reflects the independent judgment of the agency regarding the impacts of a project, the level of
18 significance of the impacts both before and after mitigation, and mitigation measures proposed to
19 reduce the impacts. A Draft EIR is circulated to responsible agencies, trustee agencies with
20 resources affected by the project, and interested agencies and individuals. The purposes of public
21 and agency review of a Draft EIR include sharing expertise, disclosing agency analyses, checking
22 accuracy, detecting omissions, discovering public concerns, and soliciting counterproposals.

23 This Draft EIR has been released for a 45-day public review period. The public was advised of the
24 availability of this Draft EIR through notices placed in local newspapers, sent by email and direct
25 mailings, and announced through the Project webpage and social media.

26 A Notice of Availability (NOA) was posted with the California State Clearinghouse and at county
27 clerks/recorders offices for Stanislaus and Merced Counties. In addition, the NOA was published in
28 the following newspapers.

- 29 ● Merced Sun-Star
- 30 ● Modesto Bee

31 The Draft EIR and the documents incorporated by reference are available on the SJRRC's website.¹ A
32 printed copy of the Draft EIR and the documents incorporated by reference are available for public
33 viewing at the SJRRC offices at 949 East Channel Street in Stockton, California during normal office
34 hours (Monday through Friday 4:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.).

¹ Webpage: <https://acerail.com/merced-extension-eir/>

1 In addition, a printed copy of the Draft EIR is also available for public viewing at the following
2 locations:

- 3 • City of Turlock
4 156 S. Broadway, Suite 120
5 Turlock, CA 95380
6 Office hours: Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
- 7 • City of Merced, City Clerk's Office
8 678 West 18th Street, 1st Floor
9 Merced, CA 95340
10 Office hours: Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
11 (closed during the 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m. lunch hour)

12 Reviewers of this Draft EIR should focus on the sufficiency of the document in identifying and
13 analyzing the possible impacts on the environment and ways in which the significant effects of the
14 Project might be avoided or mitigated. Comments are most helpful when they suggest additional
15 specific alternatives or mitigation measures that would provide better ways to avoid or mitigate
16 significant environmental effects.

17 The SJRRC will hold three online open house meetings (i.e., webinars) during the Draft EIR public
18 review period. A presentation summarizing the Project and the Draft EIR will be provided, and staff
19 will be available to answer questions. While staff will be available to answer questions of a general
20 nature at this meeting; all formal comments on the EIR must be submitted in writing for
21 consideration by the SJRRC (see below).

22 Comments on this Draft EIR must be received by SJRRC no later than 5:00 p.m. on the last day of the
23 Draft EIR public review period (June 7, 2021), and can be submitted by any of the following
24 methods:

- 25 • **Mail:** San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission
26 Attn: Dan Leavitt, Manager of Regional Initiatives
27 949 East Channel Street
28 Stockton, CA 95202
- 29 • **Email:** MercedExtComments@acerail.com
- 30 • **Webpage:** Comments can be submitted using the form at the end of the Project webpage.
31 Project webpage: <https://acerail.com/merced-extension-eir/>
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