NOTICE OF PREPARATION OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

ACE Ceres–Merced Extension Project

SCOPING PERIOD: THURSDAY MAY 28, 2020 – TUESDAY JULY 7, 2020

DATE: May 28, 2020
TO: Agencies, Organizations, and Interested Parties
FROM: San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission
SUBJECT: Notice of Preparation of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the ACE Ceres-Merced Extension Project

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission (SJRRC) intends to prepare an environmental impact report (EIR), consistent with requirements under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The purpose of the EIR is to evaluate the environmental issues associated with the proposed improvements included in the Altamont Commuter Express (ACE) Ceres–Merced Extension Project (Project). The SJRRC will serve as the lead agency under CEQA for the EIR.

The purpose of this Notice of Preparation (NOP) is to notify agencies, organizations, and individuals that SJRRC plans to prepare the EIR and to request input on the scope of the environmental analysis to be performed. From public agencies, we are inviting comments on the scope and context of the environmental information that is germane to each agency's statutory responsibilities with regard to the Project. SJRRC is also requesting interested individuals' or organizations' views on the scope of the environmental document.

A. Scoping Period

The public scoping period will begin on Thursday, May 28, 2020. Written responses and comments on the scope of the ACE Ceres-Merced Extension Project will be accepted until 5:00 PM on Tuesday, July 7, 2020. Please send written comments to:

San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission
Attn: ACE Ceres–Merced Extension Project
949 East Channel Street
Stockton, CA 95202

Your comments may also be sent by email to MercedExtComments@acerail.com. Please include the "ACE Ceres–Merced Extension Project" in the subject heading.

B. Virtual Scoping Meetings

In accordance with current social distancing guidance related to the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), all scoping meetings for the ACE Ceres-Merced Extension Project will be held online as webinars. Virtual scoping meetings will take place at the following times:

- Virtual Scoping Meeting #1 (Webinar) – June 25 (3:00 pm – 4:30 pm)
- Virtual Scoping Meeting #2 (Webinar) – June 25 (6:30 pm – 8:00 pm)
- Virtual Scoping Meeting #3 (Webinar) – June 30 (6:30 pm – 8:00 pm)

The link to join each virtual scoping meeting will be made available on the Project webpage (https://acerail.com/merced-extension-eir) the day of the webinar. Visit the Project webpage at https://acerail.com/merced-extension-eir to sign up to receive email reminders for these webinars. Virtual scoping meetings will begin with a live presentation providing an overview of the Project and the CEQA process, followed by a question and answer session based on questions submitted online from attendees. All three virtual scoping meetings will be identical in format and content. The scoping meetings will provide an opportunity for the lead agency to explain the Project and to give interested agencies, organizations, and individuals an opportunity to ask questions related to the scope and content of the EIR.

C. Project History

SJRRC manages and operates the ACE service, which currently provides commuter rail service between San Jose and Stockton. The existing 86-mile ACE service corridor passes through Santa Clara, Alameda, and San Joaquin Counties, with 10 stations along the route. At the western end of the ACE corridor, ACE operates on an approximately 4-mile segment of track between San Jose and Santa Clara owned and operated by the Peninsula Corridor Joint Powers Board (PCJPB, also referred to as Caltrain). North of the Santa Clara Station to Stockton, ACE operates on approximately 82 miles of track owned by Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR). ACE operates on portions of UPRR's Coast, Niles, Oakland, and Fresno subdivisions.[1]

As part of Senate Bill (SB) 132 passed in April 2017, SJRRC was awarded $400 million for the ACE service expansion in the San Joaquin Valley, including associated system improvements. SJRRC prepared a prior EIR for the ACE Extension Lathrop to Ceres/Merced Project in 2017-2018. The prior EIR analyzed a Phase I extension from Lathrop to Ceres at a project-level detail and Phase II extension from Ceres to Merced at a programmatic level of detail. The prior EIR was certified and Phase I of the Project was approved by the SJRRC Board of Commissioners on August 3, 2018. The extension to Ceres is currently in the engineering design and permitting phase and is anticipated to start construction in fall of 2021.

The Project, for which this NOP is being released, is Phase II of the project that was analyzed in the ACE Extension Lathrop to Ceres/Merced EIR. The new EIR that is being prepared by the SJRRC will analyze the potential environmental impacts from expanding ACE service between Ceres and Merced at a project-level detail. This new project-level EIR is tiered from the programmatic analysis in the prior EIR and, thus, where appropriate, the new EIR will incorporate analysis from the prior analysis.

D. Project Location

As shown in Figure 1, the Project spans Stanislaus and Merced Counties. SJRRC proposes to extend ACE passenger rail service from Ceres to Merced by constructing and upgrading tracks with the existing UPRR Fresno Subdivision right-of-way (ROW), a total distance of approximately 34 miles. New stations and a layover and maintenance facility would be constructed along the extension alignment. The Project limits include portions of the Fresno Subdivision's ROW, additional ROW for new facilities (stations and a layover and maintenance facility), and construction or access areas located outside the ROW.

[1] A *subdivision* is a portion of railroad or railway that operates under a single timetable (authority for train movement in the area).

E. Project Objectives

The primary objectives of the Project are to enhance commuter rail and intercity service and transit connectivity in the San Joaquin Valley; reduce traffic congestion, improve regional air quality, and reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions; and to promote local and regional land use and transportation sustainability goals. Each of these objectives is discussed in detail below.

- **Enhance commuter rail and intercity service and transit connections in the San Joaquin Valley.** Project improvements would support enhanced commuter and intercity passenger rail and transit access and connectivity, as well as provide additional surface passenger transportation capacity in the San Joaquin Valley. The ACE extension to Merced would extend the reach of the existing commuter and intercity rail transportation network of the San Joaquin Valley. The Project would provide additional service to areas currently lacking access to passenger rail transportation as well as supplementing rail service to other areas. The Project would support transit-oriented development near proposed station locations. The Project would also provide an opportunity to connect with the future California High-Speed Rail System, which would integrate ACE service into a unified northern California rail network. These commuter and intercity rail connections are expected to stimulate additional ACE ridership.
- **Reduce traffic congestion, improve regional air quality, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.** An expanded and improved ACE system would provide a transportation alternative to automobile use, which would alleviate traffic congestion on corridor highway segments (along State Route-99, Interstate [I-] 205, I-580, I-680, and I-880) and result in air quality benefits and a reduction in GHG emissions. In addition, by maximizing connections with other transit services within the San Joaquin Valley, the Project would contribute to indirect benefits related to alleviating congestion and improving regional air quality. Reductions in air pollutant emissions represent long-term health benefits for ACE riders, and for residents and employees along the ACE corridor. In addition, reduction of GHG emissions would help California to meet its goals under Assembly Bill 32, the 2006 Global Warming Solutions Act (as amended by Senate Bill 32), as well as other state GHG emission reduction goals.
- **Promote local and regional land use and transportation sustainability goals.** Metropolitan areas are implementing strategies to encourage more efficient use of land resources, improve mobility, and provide alternative transportation facilities and services in order to lower GHG emissions and to maintain air quality standards. One statewide strategy adopted in the California State Implementation Plan is the development of multi-use transportation corridors, including the addition of more transit and the expansion of rail modal options. This Project would further improve regional air quality and reduce GHG emissions, beyond reducing VMT from automobiles, by supporting regional land use and transportation planning goals under the Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008 (also known as SB 375) and other local, regional, and state sustainability initiatives. ACE is evaluating potential new ACE stations between Ceres and Merced. The new transit stations could act as a catalyst for smart growth in communities by revitalizing city core areas and addressing traffic congestion issues in the cities of the northern San Joaquin Valley.

F. Project Description

The Project would consist of the following:

- a **Ceres to Merced Extension Alignment** consisting of upgrades and new tracks and bridges within the UPRR Fresno Subdivision between Ceres and Merced;
- new **Turlock**, **Livingston** or **Atwater**, and **Merced Stations** along the extension alignment; and
- a new permanent **Merced Layover & Maintenance Facility** to support extension operations.

Upon implementation of full operations of the Project, ACE train service would consist of the following:

- In the morning, three northbound trains would run from Merced Station to the Natomas/Sacramento Airport Station (included in the Valley Rail Sacramento Extension Project). Passengers boarding in Merced and Stanislaus Counties and Southern San Joaquin County would either stay on the train in the direction of Sacramento or transfer onto the three westbound trains in the direction of San Jose at the North Lathrop Station (timed transfers). One westbound train would run from Merced Station to San Jose Diridon Station.
- In the evening, three southbound trains would run from Natomas/Sacramento Airport Station to Merced Station. ACE passengers returning from the Bay Area would transfer at the North Lathrop Station (timed transfers) onto the three Sacramento to Merced trains. One eastbound/southbound train would run from San Jose Diridon Station to Merced Station.

The potential impacts from the increased operation of ACE trains between Natomas/Sacramento Airport Station and Cabral Station have been analyzed in the *Valley Rail Sacramento Extension Project EIR*. In addition, increased operation of ACE trains between the North Lathrop Station and Ceres Station have already been analyzed in the *ACE Extension Lathrop to Ceres/Merced EIR*. This Project would not increase the train service in these areas beyond what was considered in these previous EIRs. Thus, the EIR for this Project is focused on the operational impacts associated with increased train service (four roundtrip ACE trips) between Ceres Station and the proposed Merced Station.

No improvements are proposed along the existing ACE corridor between Stockton and San Jose. However, where applicable, the EIR will analyze operational impacts due to changes in ridership at existing ACE stations[2] in the San Francisco Bay Area.

H. Potential Environmental Effects

The lead agency has initially determined that the following topics will be included for evaluation in the EIR: Aesthetics, Agricultural Resources, Air Quality, Biological Resources, Cultural Resources (including Tribal Cultural Resources), Energy, Geology and Soils, Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Hazards and Hazardous Materials, Hydrology and Water Quality, Land Use and Planning, Noise and Vibration, Population and Housing, Public Services, Recreation, Safety and Security (including Wildfire), Transportation, and Utilities and Service Systems. The EIR will consider both temporary construction-period and permanent impacts. The EIR will also include a cumulative impact analysis of the impacts of the Project in combination with other planned railway projects, transportation improvements, and land use plans and projects in the various cities along the Project corridor.

[2] These include the San Jose Diridon, Santa Clara, Great America, Fremont, Pleasanton, Livermore, and Vasco Road Stations.

SJRRC is seeking comments from agencies, stakeholders, and the public regarding the scope of the environmental topics that will be analyzed in the EIR.

I. Alternatives

As required by CEQA, the EIR will consider a reasonable range of alternatives in addition to the proposed Project. SJRRC is seeking comments from agencies, stakeholders, and the public regarding feasible alternatives for evaluation in the EIR. After consideration of input from project scoping and development of environmental analysis of the proposed Project, SJRRC will consider the need for analysis of additional alternatives. Only alternatives that are feasible, meet most of the Project objectives, and reduce one or more significant environmental impacts of the proposed Project will be analyzed in detail in the Alternatives chapter of the EIR. Alternatives that are infeasible, that do not meet most of the Project objectives, or that do not reduce one of more significant environmental impacts of the proposed Project will be discussed briefly in the EIR as to why they were dismissed from further consideration but will not be analyzed in the EIR as allowed by the requirements of CEQA.

SJRRC is seeking comments from agencies, stakeholders, and the public regarding the potential alternatives that will be analyzed in the EIR.