MITC
Merced Intermodal Track Connection

NOTICE OF PREPARATION OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

Merced Intermodal Track Connection Project

SCOPING PERIOD: THURSDAY JANUARY 5, 2023 – SUNDAY FEBRUARY 19, 2023

DATE: January 5, 2023
TO: Agencies, Organizations, and Interested Parties
FROM: San Joaquin Joint Powers Authority
SUBJECT: Notice of Preparation of an Environmental Impact Report for the Merced Intermodal Track Connection Project

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the San Joaquin Joint Powers Authority (SJJPA) intends to prepare an environmental impact report (EIR), consistent with requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The purpose of the EIR is to evaluate the environmental issues associated with the proposed improvements in the Merced Intermodal Track Connection (MITC) Project (Project). SJJPA will serve as the lead agency under CEQA for the EIR. In addition, at a later time, the Project will comply with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The purpose of this Notice of Preparation is to notify agencies, organizations, and individuals that SJJPA 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 relevant to each agency's statutory responsibilities for the Project. SJJPA is also requesting interested individuals' or organizations' views on the scope of what environmental topics the EIR will evaluate and what alternatives are to be evaluated.

A. Scoping Period

The public scoping period will begin on Thursday, January 5, 2023. Written responses and comments on the scope of the Project will be accepted until 5:00 pm on Sunday, February 19, 2023. Please send written comments to:

San Joaquin Joint Powers Authority
Attn: MITC Project
949 East Channel Street
Stockton, CA 95202

Your comments may also be sent by email to Information@MITCProject.org. Please include "MITC Project" in the subject line.

B. Scoping Meeting

The scoping meeting for the Project will take place in person at the following location, date, and time:

- Merced Senior Community Center (755 West 15th Street, Merced, CA 95340) – January 26, 2023 (6:00 pm – 8:00 pm)

Visit the Project webpage at https://sjjpa.com/mitc/ to sign up to receive email reminders for the scoping meeting. The scoping meeting will begin with a presentation providing an overview of the Project and the CEQA process. Following the presentation, interested agencies, organizations, and individuals will have the

opportunity to visit informational open house stations and ask questions related to the scope and content of the EIR.

C. Project History

SJJPA manages the Amtrak San Joaquins intercity rail service between Bakersfield and Oakland. SJJPA has been working with the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission (SJRRC), California High-Speed Rail Authority (CHSRA), California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), California State Transportation Agency (CalSTA), the City of Merced, Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) and the Early Train Operator for the California High-Speed Rail (CAHSR) Project to integrate the San Joaquins and the Altamont Corridor Express (ACE) passenger rail services with the HSR service to Merced, as shown on Figure 1. SJRRC operates ACE commuter rail service between San Jose and Stockton.

To most efficiently integrate the San Joaquins and ACE rail services with the Merced to Bakersfield HSR Early Operating Segment and future Phase I HSR service, CHSRA, CalSTA, Caltrans, the City of Merced, SJJPA, and SJRRC are planning for a new integrated station in downtown Merced between O and R Streets that will connect three services:

- **ACE Rail Service:** SJRRC is in the development process of extending ACE service to Merced between O and R Streets (which would become part of the proposed new integrated station).[1] SJJRC environmentally cleared the ACE service entering the proposed integrated station in 2021.
- **HSR Service:** The 2012 Record of Decision for the California HSR Merced to Fresno section[2] approved an HSR station northwest of G Street and 16th Street in Merced. CHSRA, in coordination with SJJPA and the City of Merced, is environmentally reviewing the potential relocation of the station from the currently proposed site at G Street to a proposed new integrated station between O and R Streets.
- **San Joaquins Rail Service:** The Project proposes infrastructure improvements to connect the San Joaquins service to the proposed integrated station in downtown Merced. This will result in connecting the San Joaquins rail service to the interim HSR operations (and future Silicon Valley to Central Valley and Phase I HSR service) in downtown Merced by creating a direct link between the BNSF Railway (BNSF) alignment and the integrated Merced station. The Project concept is included in the SJJPA *2022 Business Plan Update,*[3] which was approved by the SJJPA Board of Directors.

The Project includes a new track connection from the BNSF corridor to the proposed integrated station in downtown Merced, in addition to a new platform, that will allow for a cross-platform transfer between the San Joaquins and HSR. The Project only includes the construction of the track connection and the San Joaquins platform; it does not include the construction of the rest of the integrated station.

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[1] ICF, *ACE Ceres-Merced Extension Project Draft Environmental Impact Report*, April 2021, https://acerail.com/wp-content/uploads/00a_Ceres-Merced_Draft_Cover-Page_Title-Page_Table-of-Contents.pdf.

[2] CHRSA, *California High Speed Rail, Merced to Fresno Record of Decision.* September 8, 2012. https://hsr.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/docs/programs/merced-fresno-eir/final_EIR_MerFres_FRA09182012.pdf.

[3] SJJPA, *2022 Business Plan Update*,https://sjjpa.com/wp-content/uploads/2022-SJJPA-Business-Plan-Update.pdf, Accessed November 22, 2022.

CHSRA is planning to construct the Merced to Bakersfield HSR Early Operating Segment by 2030 and to extend the HSR service to the Bay Area after 2030 (referred to as Silicon Valley to Central Valley HSR). When the Merced to Bakersfield HSR Early Operating Segment is operational, the San Joaquins passenger rail service between Merced and Bakersfield would be replaced by the HSR service and the SJJPA would terminate the San Joaquins intercity rail service in Merced. HSR will provide faster, more reliable, and more frequent service than the San Joaquins currently provides between Merced and Bakersfield.

Implementing the Project would allow direct transfers from San Joaquins service to HSR at the proposed integrated station in downtown Merced. The San Joaquins would offer intercity service between the San Francisco Bay Area (Bay Area)/Sacramento and northern San Joaquin Valley. The Project would provide a cross-platform transfer between the San Joaquins and HSR for passengers traveling between the Bay Area/Sacramento and Madera/ Fresno/ Kings/ Tulare/ Bakersfield/Southern California (via Thruway bus connection).

Without the Project, passengers would disembark at the existing San Joaquins station at West 24th Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Way and would have to walk to the HSR station, take the bus, use rideshare or taxis, or use a shuttle between the stations. Additionally, without the Project, the transfer would not be integrated and would be inconvenient for potential riders, resulting in decreased ridership on HSR and the San Joaquins. Without an integrated connection many of the benefits of the HSR Early Operating Segment (and future Phase I HSR service) would not be realized. The Early Train Operator for CHSRA developed the *Central Valley Segment System Management & Operations Interim Financial Plan* in support of the CHSRA business plans.[4] The report emphasizes the importance of the connections from ACE and San Joaquins to HSR, including:

> "In conclusion, interim HSR services between Merced – Bakersfield creates significant value, when connected to the total existing corridor (including ACE, San Joaquins and bus network). The development of an integrated service concept with optimized connections results in improved services and reduction in travel time for the passenger."[5]
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> "When comparing the 2029 No Build to the 2029 Build, the total system ridership increase is +121%, or from 3,969,000 to 8,776,000 ridership respectively. This increase is supported by a significant growth in service frequency and connectivity provided by the ACE, San Joaquins and bus services that are designed to complement the High-Speed Rail service between Merced and Bakersfield."[6]

The *Central Valley Segment System Management & Operations Interim Financial Plan* outlines an integrated service concept evaluated jointly with CHSRA and SJRRC/SJJPA with the goal of maximizing systemwide ridership while balancing operations and maintenance costs. The integrated service concept is for the year 2030 and would achieve 12 San Joaquins round-trip trains per day (and 6 ACE round-trip trains per day) in Merced.[7]

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[4] CHSRA, *Central Valley Segment System Management & Operations Interim Financial Plan,* June 10, 2020, https://hsr-test.hsr.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/docs/about/business_plans/2020_Business_Plan_CV_Segment_System_Mgmt_Operations_Interim_Fin_plan.pdf.

[5] Ibid. Page 24.

[6] Ibid. Page 180.

[7] Ibid.

Before COVID-19, seven San Joaquins round-trip trains per day provided service to Merced. The MITC environmental process will evaluate San Joaquins service to best integrate with HSR and achieve the 2030 integrated service concept (2030 Build with HSR) for at least 12 San Joaquins round-trip trains per day into the proposed new integrated station.

D. Project Location

As shown on Figure 1, the Project is located entirely within Merced County and almost entirely within the city limits of Merced. A small portion of the Project near Ashby Road and Miles Court is outside the city limits of Merced. The new track for the Project would run from the BNSF corridor just north of where it crosses Snelling Highway (State Route [SR] 59) to the north to a station platform at the proposed integrated station located between R and O Streets in downtown Merced to the south.

E. Project Goals and Objectives

The primary objectives of the Project are to create a seamless cross-platform connection between the San Joaquins Intercity Service and the Merced-Bakersfield HSR Early Operating Segment and future Phase I HSR service, to increase intercity passenger rail ridership, to reduce vehicle miles traveled, to improve regional air quality, and to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. These objectives are outlined below.

- **Integrate and create a seamless connection between the San Joaquins service and the Merced-Bakersfield HSR Early Operating Segment and future Phase I HSR service in Merced.** Relocating the San Joaquin's station in Merced would align with the planned HSR station and allow passengers to transfer between services on a shared platform.
- **Enhance San Joaquins service to better serve regional markets.** Integrating the San Joaquins with the HSR system would improve the connection of regional markets between the Bay Area/Sacramento and the northern San Joaquin Valley and increase ridership and service benefits.
- **Reduce traffic congestion, improve regional air quality, and reduce GHG emissions.** The Project would improve intercity passenger rail service between the San Joaquin Valley, Sacramento Region, and Bay Area providing a transportation alternative to the automobile that reduces GHG emissions.

F. Project Description

As shown on Figure 1, the Project would extend the San Joaquins intercity passenger rail service from the BNSF corridor to a proposed integrated station in downtown Merced between R and O Streets. The Project would consist of the following:

- New passenger rail connection for the San Joaquins from the BNSF north of SR 59, running along the SR 59 corridor and immediately west of the ACE/Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) corridor, to the southern terminus at the proposed integrated station, including these features:
    - New at-grade track on the west side of SR 59 crossing Cooper Avenue, which would include right-of-way (ROW) procurement, business relocations, and California Public Utility Commission approval and proceeding southward

  - New aerial guideway to span 16th Street, Bear Creek, and the west side of the ACE/UPRR corridor that would connect into the east side of the proposed integrated station

- Shifting ACE/UPRR spur track that accesses industrial area north of SR 59, requiring ROW procurement and new bridge over Bear Creek
- New aerial guideway on the west side of the ACE/UPRR corridor that would connect into the east side of the HSR platform (which would be shared with the San Joaquins) including ROW procurement for columns and aerial easement
- Expansion of the approved ACE Merced Layover and Maintenance Facility to include new and upgraded tracks for San Joaquins trains and joint use of the initial facility for both ACE and San Joaquins trains, as discussed below.

As part of the Project, the approved ACE Merced Layover and Maintenance Facility would need to be expanded to facilitate the termination of the San Joaquins service in Merced. The expansion would include tracks to provide access for San Joaquins trains to move from the elevated Merced Station to the Merced Layover and Maintenance Facility for cleaning and light maintenance.[8] The expansion would provide space for San Joaquins trains to layover between station arrivals and departures and for staging to re-enter the station. At full buildout, the Merced Layover and Maintenance Facility would be able to store eight trains at any given time.

Parking needs at the integrated station for San Joaquins passengers will be evaluated in collaboration with the City of Merced, CHSRA, and the other modes connecting to the integrated station.

The Project is the critical link between the San Joaquins service and HSR service, allowing the San Joaquin's Intercity Rail and ACE to connect to the future HSR. The Project is a crucial piece to the overall vision of megaregional rail in Northern California.

H. Potential Environmental Effects

SJJPA has initially determined that the following topics will be included for evaluation in the EIR for the Project:

- Aesthetics
- Agricultural Resources
- Air Quality
- Biological Resources
- Cultural Resources (including Tribal Cultural Resources)
- Energy
- Geology and Soils

[8] The track from the at-grade ACE station to the maintenance facility can't be used by the San Joaquins which must be elevated to cross over the UPRR and serve HSR's elevated station.

- 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
- Utilities and Service Systems

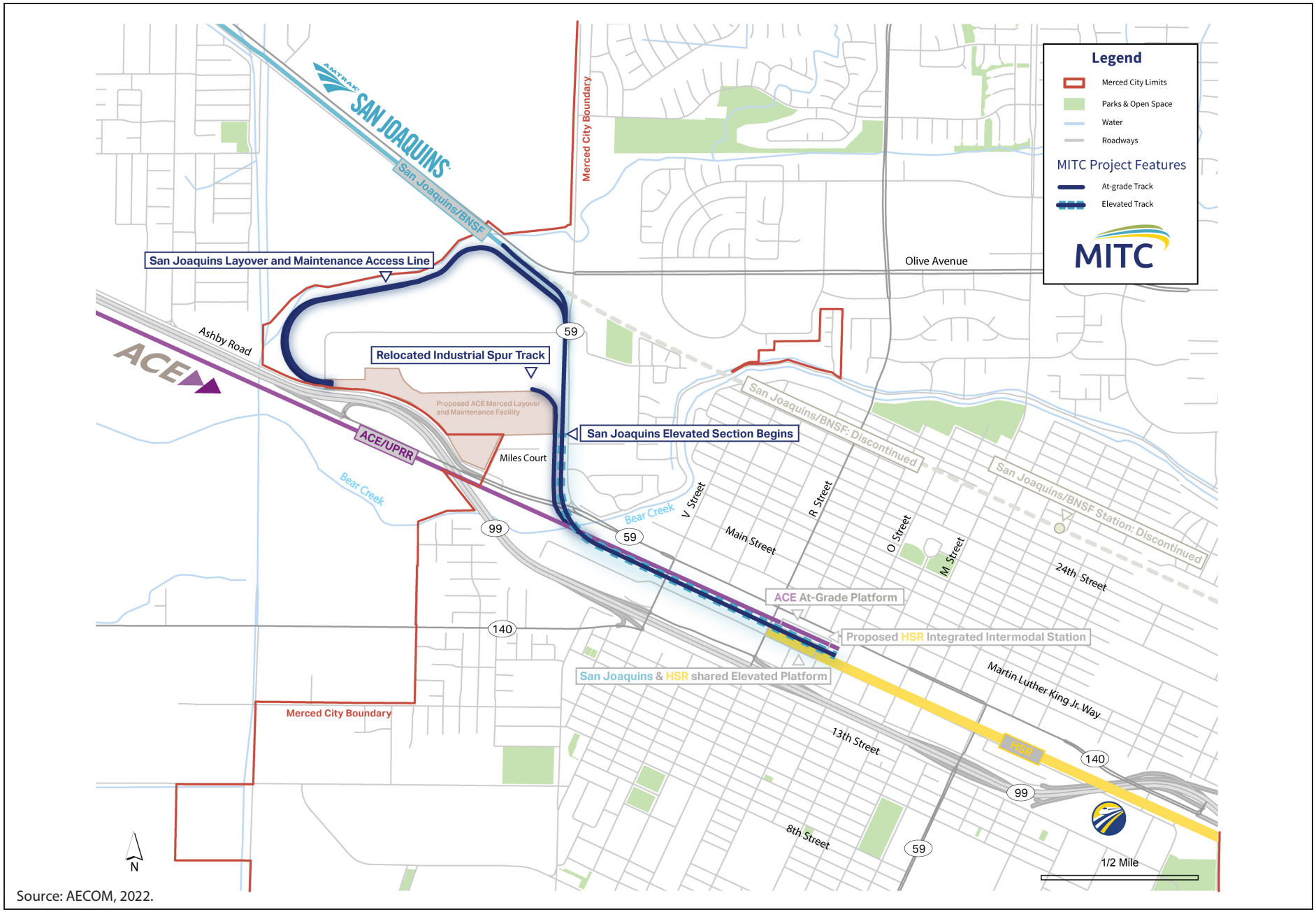
The EIR will consider both temporary construction-period and permanent (operational) impacts. The EIR will also include a cumulative impact analysis of the impacts of the Project in combination with other planned projects, including railway projects, transportation improvements, and land use plans and projects along the Project corridor.

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

I. Alternatives

As required by CEQA, the EIR will consider a reasonable range of alternatives in addition to the Project. SJJPA 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 Project, SJJPA 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 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 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.

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



Source: AECOM, 2022.

Graphics ... BNP191 (12-29-2022) JC

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Figure 1
Project Features
Merced Intermodal Track Connection Project