



UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, RURAL
DEVELOPMENT, FOOD AND DRUG
ADMINISTRATION

SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY CONSTRUCTION,
VETERANS AFFAIRS AND RELATED AGENCIES

April 7, 2021

Mr. Brian P. Kelly
Chief Executive Officer
California High-Speed Rail Authority
770 L Street, Suite 620
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Mr. Kelly,

I write to urge you, and the California High-Speed Rail Authority (Authority), to work with the City of Wasco to ensure that the Wasco Farm Labor Housing complex, now vacant as a result of the Authority's actions, is addressed in a timely manner.

Residents of Wasco have reached out to me concerning the impact the California High-Speed Rail (CHSR) project is having on their community, specifically noting the rise in crime and the developing public health crisis at the vacant Wasco Farm Labor Housing complex. The abandoned housing complex, which spans over 20 acres and contains more than 200 residential units in more than 100 structures, has negatively impacted the surrounding community and generated a host of socio-economic and environmental impacts, with many of these burdens falling on the community. Wasco has raised these concerns numerous times to the Authority and has requested that the Authority demolish the complex and clear the site.

In 2013, the Authority adopted the Preferred Alignment for the Fresno to Bakersfield section of the CHSR project. While another viable route existed to the east, avoiding impacts to the low-income and predominantly minority population in the community of Wasco, the Authority's staff recommended the alternative which runs directly through Wasco, disrupting homes, businesses, and existing Amtrak services. Wasco brought their concerns to the Authority's attention in numerous letters, City Council resolutions, public comments, and during in-person meetings as far back as 2011.

While acknowledging Wasco's concerns, the Authority's Board of Directors (Board) certified the Final Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement (EIR/EIS) for the Fresno to Bakersfield section of the CHSR project and proceeded with plans for the rail line to come through the city along the existing BNSF railroad. The Board noted that the Wasco Farm Labor Housing complex, located less than 300 feet away from the high-speed rail alignment, posed significant challenges for the Authority. Faced with the expense of mitigating the impact of the HSR project adjacent to the rail tracks, the Authority opted for a cheaper

alternative and contributed \$10 million to the development of a new \$50 million housing complex in another part of the city to relocate most of the impacted residents.

Today, the effects of this decision are being felt by the entire community of Wasco. The social, environmental, and economic impacts of the CHSR project have been especially detrimental to Wasco's low-income, disadvantaged, and minority residents. The rapid decline of the abandoned buildings has significantly disrupted how Wasco residents, businesses, and the local government function. Escalating criminal activity is taking a considerable toll on the City's resources, especially its law enforcement. The Kern County Sheriff's Office, which provides contracted law enforcement services within the city limits, stated in a February 12, 2021 letter:

"... The Labor camp is essentially seen as a place where gang members and criminals break in to, hide out, and conduct illegal activity. As much directive patrol that has been conducted at this location, it has not deterred the ongoing illegal activities."

The CHSR construction in Wasco is entirely within an SB 535 and AB 1550 Disadvantaged and Low-income Community and is home to some of Wasco's poorest residents, a Migrant Head Start daycare facility, and a majority of Wasco's small independently owned businesses. Knowledge of Wasco's socioeconomic demographics was information the Authority was keenly aware of when it selected the project's alignment. The information was specifically noted in the project's EIR/EIS, showing the population density of minority and low-income individuals was in close proximity to the alignments then under consideration. Residents are not only negatively impacted by the condition of the former housing complex, but are also subjected to increased air pollution, dust, and other detrimental impacts from the project.

Wasco recently produced a draft scope of work for a mitigation agreement to address the condition of the former housing complex, which estimated that the total cost to remediate the property would be approximately \$9.3 million. After nearly a year of verbal assurances that the Authority would address any adverse impact the project has had on the community, the Wasco City Council approved a letter to the Authority on May 5, 2020, formally requesting that it address the adverse impact the project was having on the city and broader community related to the former farm labor housing property. The Authority's letter response on July 9, 2020, stated that, "...the Authority was not financially responsible for the disposition, demolition, maintenance, and security of the former Wasco Farm Labor Housing property".

It is my understanding that the Authority recently applied for an INFRA Funding Opportunity by the U.S. Department of Transportation, which Wasco submitted a letter of support for. The Authority's memorandum to the California State Transportation Agency stated in their grant application that the funding would be directed toward additional costs related to a second phase of a, "...new farmworker housing project... which would include demolition of derelict housing which has already been replaced." While the Authority's acknowledgment of the issue is a positive development, it is pinning the remediation efforts of a nearly \$100 billion project on the contingency that the project receives more federal funding. Regardless of this grant application's approval, the Authority is responsible for a quick solution for this struggling community.

Wasco cannot afford the cost of demolishing the former farm labor housing complex, but it also cannot afford to let the complex further deteriorate and continue to be a burden on the community. I recently toured this vacant housing complex and was shocked to see such deterioration and criminal activity had set in. The Authority must create a concrete plan to address the impact of their project. I hope to hear from the Authority on efforts being made to remediate the impacts of the high-speed rail project on the City of Wasco and ask for any information that can be provided on the timing of these plans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'D. Valadao', written in a cursive style.

David G. Valadao
Member of Congress