SUBJECT: REPORT ON TRANS-STATE HIGH SPEED RAIL (HSR) PROJECT AND PORTERVILLE’S EFFORTS TO PRESERVE THE RAILROAD RIGHT OF WAY FROM PORTERVILLE TO THE HSR CORRIDOR

SOURCE: PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT

COMMENT: The High Speed Rail Authority continues to make progress in processing the environmental documents for a trans-state high speed rail system. It is anticipated that a ballot measure, for voter approval, could be on a statewide ballot as early as next year. The Authority has chosen an alignment that is just west of the Highway 99 corridor. A station is planned near Visalia.

Businesses located in and near the cities of Porterville, Lindsay and Terra Bella have freight rail service via a single rail carrier, the San Joaquin Valley Railroad (SJVR) Co. In 2001, States Rail, the owner of SJVR, was considering the abandonment of all rail lines out of Exeter servicing Lindsay, Porterville, Terra Bella, Ducor and Richgrove due to insufficient requests for rail service. Since that announcement, a coalition of current users and government representatives, including the cities of Porterville and Lindsay, TCAG and Tulare County, have been working together to address local needs and concerns.

In early 2002, SJVR was acquired by Rail America. Representatives of Rail America and SJVR, met with local interested parties to discuss service, usage and other opportunities to increase usage of local rail service. Two issues have become the focus related to the future of rail service in the southern county.

The first issue relates to the current level of use by merchants for the transportation of goods. Lack of line usage makes the cost of continuing rail service and rail maintenance prohibitive. Without a dramatic improvement in rail use, train service would be discontinued and the rails salvaged. This could lead to the sale of the right of way. As a result of the efforts of the coalition, a few businesses in Lindsay have committed to using the rail system thus insuring, for the time being, that the rails will not be abandoned and the right of way sold.
The second issue relates to future use of the rail system. Discussions have been held with principals at Rail America concerning the viability of a passenger rail system in conjunction with a freight rail system connecting the south county to Visalia and points west. To date, no concrete commitments have been made or offered by Rail America but, the discussions continue. A feasibility study, conducted a few years ago, showed that passenger service to Porterville would be feasible if the SJVR corridor is preserved and a connection can be made to the High Speed Rail system near Visalia. State and Federal funding has already been obtained to construct passenger rail service from NAS Lemoore to Visalia in the SJVR right of way.

RECOMMENDATION: The Porterville City Council:

1. Continue to monitor the progress of the High Speed Rail Authority;

2. Continue to support the staff effort to preserve the SJVR corridor; and

3. Work with the Chamber of Commerce and other organizations to convince the public to vote for the ballot measure to construct the Trans-State High Speed Rail System when it appears on the ballot.