



NOTICE OF PREPARATION OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

ACE Extension Lathrop to Ceres/Merced

SCOPING PERIOD: WEDNESDAY JANUARY 10, 2018 – FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2018

DATE: January 10, 2018
TO: Agencies, Organizations, and Interested Parties
FROM: San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission
SUBJECT: Notice of Preparation of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR)

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission (SJRRRC) 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) Extension Lathrop to Ceres/Merced Project. The SJRRRC 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 SJRRRC 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 proposed project. We are also requesting interested individuals' or organizations' views on the scope of the environmental document.

A prior NOP was issued for the *ACEforward* project (State Clearinghouse #2013062059) in June 2013, and the draft EIR for the *ACEforward* project was released in May 2017. The *ACEforward* project included the expansion of ACE service between the San Joaquin Valley and San Jose, as well as extension of ACE service to Modesto and Merced. SJRRRC has decided to not proceed with the *ACEforward* project and hereby rescinds the prior NOP. Since the *ACEforward* project is not moving forward, response to comments received on the *ACEforward* draft EIR will not be responded to and will not be part of the administrative record for this new EIR for the ACE Extension Lathrop to Ceres/Merced Project. This is a new environmental process for a new project.

A. Scoping Period

Written responses and comments on the scope of the ACE Extension Lathrop to Ceres/Merced Project will be accepted until 5:00 PM on Friday, February 9, 2018. Please send written comments to:

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

Your comments may also be sent by email to ACEextension.south@gmail.com. Please include the "ACE Extension Lathrop to Ceres/Merced Project" in the subject heading. A public scoping meeting is scheduled in late January, at the time and date listed below.

B. Scoping Meeting

A public scoping meeting will be held for the project at the following location:

- Ceres Community Center
Small Assembly Room
2701 Fourth Street
Ceres, CA 95307
Monday, January 29, 2018, from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

The scoping meeting will provide an opportunity for the lead agency to explain the project and to give interested agencies, organizations, and individuals an additional opportunity to comment on the scope and content of the EIR.

C. Project History

SJRRC manages and operates ACE service, which currently provides commuter and intercity 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

In 2013, SJRRC identified and developed a suite of improvements, known as the *ACEforward* plan, to modernize the existing ACE service that would result in faster commuter and intercity train services and could establish a connection between the San Joaquin Valley and San Jose within the next 10 years. A NOP was issued in June 2013 to initiate the prior environmental process for *ACEforward*. In May 2017, SJRRC released the *ACEforward* draft EIR which analyzed the environmental impacts associated with the phased improvement plan to increase service reliability and frequency, enhance passenger facilities, reduce travel times along the existing ACE service corridor from San Jose to Stockton, and to extend ACE service to Manteca, Modesto, Ceres, Turlock and Merced. In the near term, *ACEforward* proposed improvements necessary to support ACE service of up to six daily roundtrips between San Jose and the San Joaquin Valley, a potential reroute of ACE service through downtown Tracy, and the extension of ACE service to Modesto. In the longer term, *ACEforward* proposed a suite of improvements that would ultimately support ACE service of up to 10 daily roundtrips between San Jose and the San Joaquin Valley, a train-to-train ACE/BART connection, and the extension of ACE service to Ceres, Turlock and Merced.

As the *ACEforward* project has progressed, funding for the entirety of *ACEforward* improvements has been uncertain. However, 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 improvement. Through the *ACEforward* project development and environmental review, substantial financial, environmental, and

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

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 have shown 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 extension of service in the Central Valley is now the focus of SJRRC vision for commuter and intercity passenger rail services for ACE. The improvements envisioned in the *ACEforward* plan no longer represents the intention of SJRRC for ACE. For this reason, SJRRC is rescinding the prior *ACEforward* NOP and draft EIR and intends to prepare a new EIR for this ACE Extension Lathrop to Ceres/Merced Project.

D. Project Location

As shown in Figure 1, the project spans San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Merced Counties. SJRRC proposes to extend ACE passenger rail service from Lathrop to Ceres and Merced by constructing and upgrading tracks with the existing UPRR Fresno Subdivision right-of-way (ROW), a total distance of approximately 58 miles. New stations and operating facilities would be constructed in the Lathrop area and along the extension alignment. The project limits includes portions of the UPRR Oakland and Fresno Subdivisions ROW, additional ROW for new facilities (stations and layover yards) and for any construction or access areas located outside the ROW.

E. Purpose and Need for the Project

The primary purposes of the project are to enhance commuter and intercity service and transit connectivity in the San Joaquin Valley; reduce traffic congestion, improve regional air quality, and reduce 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 and intercity service and transit connections in the San Joaquin Valley.** Project improvements would support enhanced commuter and intercity transit connectivity and provide additional surface passenger transportation capacity in the San Joaquin Valley. The ACE extension to Ceres and Merced would service the existing commuter and intercity transportation needs of the San Joaquin Valley, and would support transit-oriented development in the downtown parts of cities with potential or proposed service. Modesto Max (City of Modesto bus transit) currently run buses to meet each ACE train at the Existing Lathrop/Manteca Station. The extension to Merced would also provide a future opportunity to connect with the California HSR System which would integrate ACE into a unified northern California rail system. These commuter and intercity transit 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 would provide a transportation alternative to automobile use, which would alleviate traffic congestion on corridor highway segments (along SR-99, 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 well as post-2020 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 as a means 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 in Lathrop and downtown areas between Manteca 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 Central Valley.

F. Project Description

The project contains both Phase I and Phase II improvements. The Phase I improvements will be analyzed at a project level of detail based on preliminary engineering and Phase II improvements are analyzed at a programmatic, more conceptual level of detail because only conceptual engineering has been completed at this time.² Phase I improvements would support the ACE service extension to Ceres and Phase II improvements would support the ACE service extension to Merced. No improvements are proposed along the existing ACE corridor between Stockton and San Jose. However, where applicable, the EIR will analyze Phase I operational impacts due to changes in ridership at existing ACE destination stations³ in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The extension from Ceres to Merced is analyzed at a programmatic-level at this time because this extension would be implemented at a later date, and because the location of the ACE Merced Station is dependent on the final location of the High-Speed Rail station and may be subject to change. Thus, the analysis of the extension to Merced is more general in nature, and a more detailed subsequent project-level analysis would be undertaken in the future prior approval of the Merced extension.

² CEQA permits the use of a tiered process for environmental review. The first tier is a program-level analysis of an entire program of improvements which comprehensively reviews the environmental impacts of a program as a whole at a broad conceptual level of analysis including cumulative impacts. The second tier is a project-level analysis conducted for specific improvement that are sufficiently designed to allow for a detailed analysis and the identification and disclosure of project-level environmental impacts. Improvements that are analyzed at a program level of review would subsequently be reviewed at the project level before they can be approved at a project level and constructed.

³ These include the San Jose Diridon, Santa Clara, Great America, Fremont, Pleasanton, Livermore, and Vasco Road Stations.

Overview of Phase I Improvements

Phase I improvements that are part of the project consists of the following:

- a new **North Lathrop Station** and/or new **Relocated Lathrop/Manteca Station** and/or track improvements at the **Existing Lathrop/Manteca Station**;
- a new **Oakland-Fresno Subdivision Connection** which would construct a new track connection between the Oakland and Fresno Subdivisions;
- a **Ceres Extension Alignment** consisting of upgrades to track, new tracks and bridges within the UPRR Fresno Subdivision between Lathrop and Ceres;
- new **Downtown Manteca, Ripon, Modesto, and Ceres Stations** along the extension alignment;
- a new temporary **Ceres Layover Facility** (two variants under consideration, **variants 1 or 2**) to support extension operations until the extension to Merced is constructed, at which time a permanent layover facility would be located in Merced; and
- an interim bus bridge between Merced and Ceres, with stops at the **Turlock, Livingston, and Merced Bus Stops**.

The conceptual service plan for Phase I with the ACE service extension to Ceres could consist of two operational scenarios, depending on whether SJRRC chooses to implement direct ACE service from Ceres to San Jose or not.

- Phase I Operational Scenario A: Ceres–Lathrop trains/no direct ACE service between Ceres and San Jose
 - In the morning, four westbound trains from Ceres to Lathrop, where passengers would transfer onto the four westbound trains from Stockton to San Jose at the selected Lathrop-area station (timed transfers). Four buses from Merced would meet the four trains at Ceres in the morning.
 - In the evening, four eastbound trains from San Jose to Stockton, where passengers would transfer onto the four eastbound trains from Lathrop to Ceres at the selected Lathrop-area station (timed transfers). Four buses would meet the four trains at Ceres in the evening and provide a connection to Merced.
- Phase I Operational Scenario B: Ceres–Lathrop trains/direct ACE service between Ceres and San Jose
 - In the morning, three westbound trains from Ceres to Lathrop, where passengers would transfer onto the three westbound trains from Stockton to San Jose at the selected Lathrop-area station (timed transfers); and one westbound train from Ceres to San Jose. Four buses from Merced would meet the four trains at Ceres in the morning.
 - In the evening, three eastbound trains from San Jose to Stockton, where passengers would transfer onto the three eastbound trains from Lathrop to Ceres at the selected Lathrop-area station (timed transfers); and one eastbound train from San Jose to Ceres. Four buses would meet the four trains at Ceres in the evening and provide a connection to Merced.

With Phase I's service extension to Ceres, a bus bridge would operate between Merced and Ceres, with stops in Livingston and Turlock. Bus bridge service would consist of four buses in the morning that would shuttle passengers from Merced to Ceres, where passengers would transfer onto westbound Stockton to San Jose trains. In the evening, four buses would meet passengers disembarking eastbound San Jose to Stockton trains and provide bus services to Merced. The bus bridge service between Merced and Ceres would discontinue, pending the completion of the ACE service extension to Merced.

Overview of Phase II Improvements

Phase II improvements that are part of the project consists of the following:

- a **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 Facility** to support extension operations (which would replace the temporary **Ceres Layover Facility** constructed in the Phase I).

The conceptual service plan for Phase II could consist of two operational scenarios, depending on whether SJRRC chooses to implement direct ACE service from Merced to San Jose.

- Phase II Operational Scenario A: Merced–Lathrop trains/no direct ACE service between Merced and San Jose
 - In the morning, four westbound trains from Merced to Lathrop, where passengers would transfer onto the four westbound trains from Stockton to San Jose at the selected Lathrop-area station (timed transfers).
 - In the evening, four eastbound trains from San Jose to Stockton, where passengers would transfer onto the four eastbound trains from Lathrop to Merced at the selected Lathrop-area station (timed transfers).
- Phase II Operational Scenario B: Merced–Lathrop trains/direct ACE service between Merced and San Jose
 - In the morning, three westbound trains from Merced to Lathrop, where passengers would transfer onto the three westbound trains from Stockton to San Jose at the selected Lathrop-area station (timed transfers); and one westbound train from Merced to San Jose.
 - In the evening, three eastbound trains from San Jose to Stockton, where passengers would transfer onto the three eastbound trains from Lathrop to Merced at the selected Lathrop-area station (timed transfers); and one eastbound train from San Jose to Merced.

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, Energy, Geology and Soils, Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Hazardous Materials, Hydrology and Water Quality, Land Use and

Planning, Noise and Vibration, Population and Housing, Public Services, Recreation, Safety and Security, Transportation and Traffic, 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.

SJRRC is seeking comments from agencies, stakeholders, and the public regarding the environmental effects and potential alternatives to 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. At a minimum, the following alternatives will be evaluated in detail in the EIR:

1. No-Extension Alternative (No-Project Alternative);
2. Proposed Project: consists of the **Oakland-Fresno Subdivision Connection, Ceres Extension Alignment**, the temporary **Ceres Layover Facility variant 2**, a temporary bus bridge service from Merced to Ceres with stops at the **Turlock, Livingston, and Merced Bus Stops, Merced Extension Alignment**, and the permanent **Merced Layover Facility** with stations at **Existing Lathrop/Manteca, North Lathrop, Downtown Manteca, Ripon, Modesto, Ceres, Turlock, Livingston, and Merced**;
3. **Relocated Lathrop/Manteca Station** alternative: consists of all the improvements in the Proposed Project, except that the **Relocated Lathrop/Manteca Station** would be selected as the only Lathrop area station instead of the **North Lathrop** and **Existing Lathrop/Manteca Stations**;
4. **Existing Lathrop/Manteca Station** alternative: consists of all the improvements in the Proposed Project, except that the **Existing Lathrop/Manteca Station** would be selected as the only Lathrop area station (no **North Lathrop Station**); and
5. **North Lathrop Station** alternative: consists of all the improvements in the Proposed Project, except that the **Oakland-Fresno Subdivision Connection** would not be implemented and the **North Lathrop Station** would be selected as the only Lathrop area station (no **Existing Lathrop/Manteca Station**).
6. **Relocated Lathrop/Manteca and North Lathrop Stations** alternative: consists of all the improvements in the Proposed Project, except a different selection of stations for the two-station scenario in Lathrop, consisting of new **North Lathrop** and **Relocated Lathrop/Manteca Stations** would be selected;
7. **Ceres Layover Facility, variant 1** alternative: consists of all the improvements in the Proposed Project, except that the **Ceres Layover Facility, variant 1** would be selected in lieu of variant 2 of the layover facility;
8. **Atwater Station** alternative: consists of all the improvements in the Proposed Project, except that the **Atwater Station** would be selected lieu of a station in Livingston.

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 the project purpose and need, and reduce one or more significant environmental impacts of the proposed project will be analyzed in detail. Alternatives that are infeasible, that do not meet the project purpose and need, or that do not reduce one of more significant environmental impacts of the proposed project will be discussed in the EIR but will not be analyzed in detailed as allowed by the requirements of CEQA.

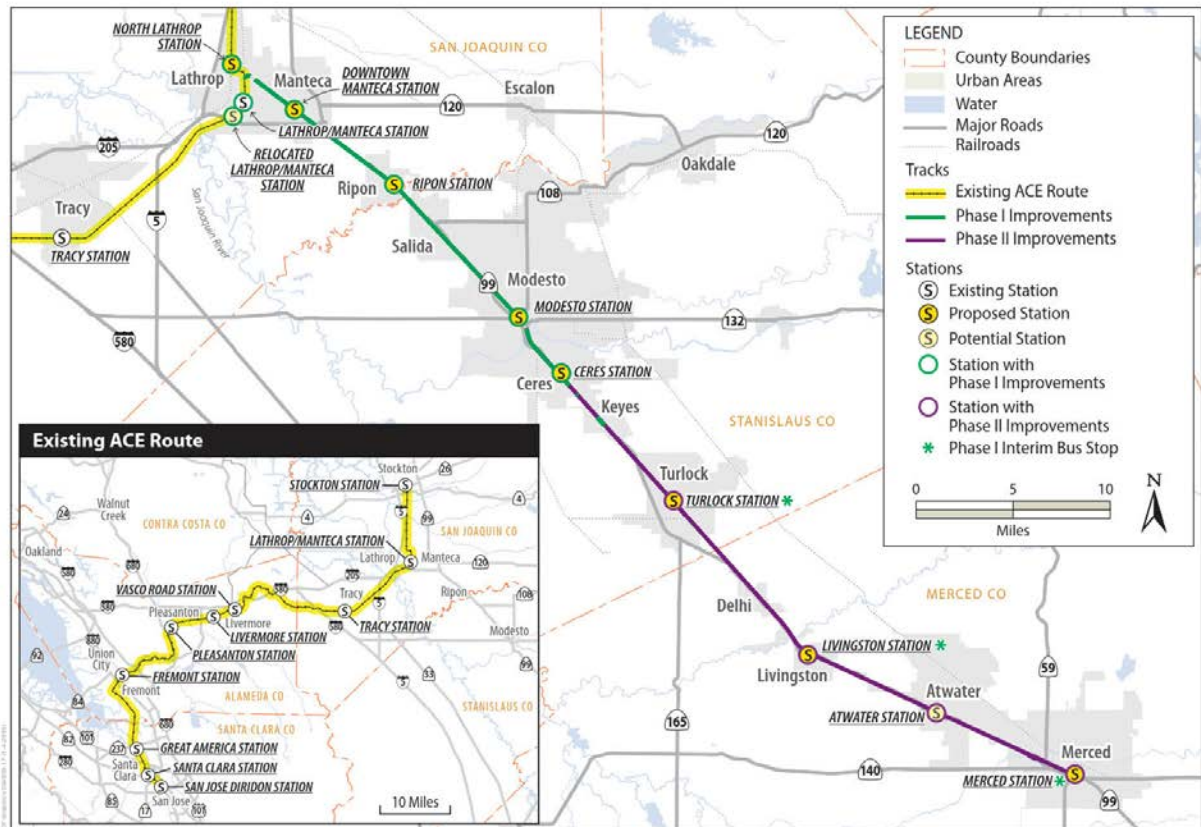


Figure 1
Project Location Map
 ACE Extension Lathrop to Ceres/Merced