



Train to Vegas possible by 2015

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VICTORVILLE • Victor Valley residents may be able to celebrate New Year's Eve 2015 in Las Vegas without battling Interstate 15 traffic.

With federal hearings past and a related lawsuit moving toward settlement, the first dedicated high-speed passenger rail system in the United States could break ground in Victorville next year.

DesertXpress is a \$3.5 billion privately funded project that will connect Victorville and Las Vegas, covering the 185 miles over newly built track at a top speed of 150 mph.

The train will drop visitors in Vegas in roughly an hour and 20 minutes and cost \$110 round-trip, according to DesertXpress President Tom Stone. There also would be a possible future connection to Palmdale.

The Federal Railroad Administration, which is the lead agency reviewing the project, recently held a series of well-attended public comment meetings in Las Vegas, Barstow and Victorville on its draft environmental impact statement for DesertXpress. The public has another week to submit comments on the draft EIS, which took nearly three years and some \$25 million to complete.

"There were over 100 people in attendance and every verbal comment that was provided was positive and supportive," said Andrew Mack, DesertXpress vice president, of the Victorville hearing.

The main point of contention raised at some of the hearings, according to reports, is the competing California Nevada Interstate Maglev Project, a federally funded train that would run from Anaheim to Las Vegas with stops in Ontario, Victorville, Barstow and Primm.

According to the draft EIS, the railroad agency is looking at the projects as mutually exclusive because there's not a large enough market to support them both.

The Maglev is roughly a year away from receiving its draft EIS from the federal rail agency.

Meanwhile, a lawsuit over the 2006 memorandum of understanding the city of Victorville signed with DesertXpress Enterprises LLC, Transit Real Estate Development and Inland Group Inc. for the rail terminal, maintenance and storage facility is moving toward a settlement, according to court records.

Investment company Niles LLC filed a civil suit against Victorville last June, claiming the city gave the train's backers exclusive rights to develop land it didn't even own.

George Soneff, attorney for Niles LLC, said he expects the settlement to be final the next time the city adopts an updated specific plan.

While it's up to the contractor to determine the final sequence for the project, Stone said it's typical for construction to start where the train's maintenance facilities will be located. That means Victorville's terminus — planned as a luxury development itself — could be under construction by the end of first quarter 2010, with more than 10 million people riding the rails annually by 2015.

Kulat said there's no timeline yet for when DesertXpress' final EIS will be released, but expects it will be within the next nine months — a target Stone called “quite conservative.”

Once the final report is released, Kulat said it's up to DesertXpress to put together the funding and plans to move the project forward.

The deadline to submit public comments on the DesertXpress draft environmental impact statement is May 22. Comments can be sent to the Federal Railroad Administration at 1200 New Jersey Avenue S.E. MS-20, Washington, D.C. 20590, Attn.: DesertXpress EIS.

The full draft EIS is available at the Victorville public library and online at www.fra.dot.gov/us/content/1703.

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