

Las Vegas Sun

Work on high-speed rail set to begin this year

By [Richard N. Velotta](#) ([contact](#))

Thursday, March 25, 2010 | 6:03 p.m.

Environmental approvals for the proposed \$4 billion DesertXpress high-speed rail project between Las Vegas and Southern California are taking longer than expected, but executives with the project said Thursday they expect construction to begin this year.

"It's all just process and working through the details," DesertXpress Enterprises President Tom Stone said in a media briefing on the project. "No environmental showstoppers have been identified."

Last year, developers of the 185-mile rail line that would link Las Vegas with Victorville, Calif., said they hoped they would get final environmental approvals by the end of the first quarter of 2010 and that they would be able to break ground by summer. But Stone said the process is running three to four months behind what they had hoped, although they still expect a groundbreaking before the end of the year.

Construction is expected to take four years, meaning that revenue service for the train could begin by late 2014.

The project includes the construction of two parallel grade-level tracks across the Mohave Desert, mostly along the I-15 corridor and the accompanying electrical catenary.

Stone explained that five federal agencies are a part of the process that eventually would lead to the issuance of a Record of Decision that would give developers of DesertXpress the green light to begin construction.

The Federal Railroad Administration, a division of the U.S. Department of Transportation, is the lead agency on the adoption process. Cooperating agencies that are participating include the Federal Highway Administration (another Transportation Department agency), the Bureau of Land Management, the Surface Transportation Board (formerly the Interstate Commerce Commission) and the National Park Service.

The FHA is involved because much of the route is within the right-of-way of Interstate 15 while the BLM controls most of the other land through which the line would pass. The Park Service is involved because one of the alignment alternatives could pass through a small portion of the Mohave National Preserve in California, just south of the Nevada border.

The route between Las Vegas and Victorville includes several alignment alternatives and there are four potential sites for a station in Las Vegas and three in Victorville that must be resolved. Stone said the agencies need to determine which alternatives present the least environmental impact.

While the federal agencies work on the Record of Decision, DesertXpress Enterprises is narrowing the field to select its implementation team partner -- a process that began last August. The implementation

team will be responsible for the final engineering, construction, operations and maintenance of the train system as well as participate as a financial partner for the project.

Stone said DesertXpress received 12 proposals from prospective partners. Executives cut the field to six and there are now three finalists. He did not identify what companies are in the running.

Architectural and engineering firms that have worked on the project so far include Korve

Engineering, EarthTech, AECOM, EDAW, URS, Stantec and Marnell Consulting.

Private investors have paid for DesertXpress' costs to date and construction will be financed with private equity combined with long-term public- and private-sourced debt with the repayment coming from private sources. No taxpayer money has been used, although executives say they are considering federal loans.

Indirectly, stimulus funds appropriated to California's rail system could benefit DesertXpress if they are used in the High Desert Corridor highway project, which includes the development of the right-of-way to include the rail line. DesertXpress officials have agreed to provide technical support, engineering, right-of-way width documentation and noise-abatement specifications to California transportation planners.

When construction begins, Stone said he expects there would be multiple construction sites throughout the rail corridor at any one time. One of those sites would be a train station in Victorville. Three prospective sites are under consideration, all within close proximity of I-15.

A model of the Victorville station was unveiled at the briefing and Stone noted that it is being designed to allow trains to pass through the structure in anticipation of the line extending west to Palmdale, where it would connect with the proposed California high-speed rail line and a route between Sylmar and Bakersfield.

While work hasn't begun on the 50-mile line between Victorville and Palmdale, Stone said he has received assurances from transportation planners in Southern California that the link would be fast-tracked to enable a direct line between Las Vegas and Los Angeles. Because the California system and DesertXpress would be compatible, Stone said it would be possible for riders to board in Los Angeles and travel without changing trains all the way to Las Vegas. The trip would take between two and 2 1/2 hours, he said.

Ideally, Stone said, the environmental approvals would be completed as construction winds down on the Las Vegas-Victorville route so that workers could move to the next building phase.

But for now, the focus is on Victorville.

The model of the Victorville train station includes a 15,000-space parking area, some of it surface parking and some of it within a parking garage. It's 1 1/2 times larger than Disneyland's parking lot.

Despite mountains of public criticism, Victorville was chosen as DesertXpress' southern terminus -- until the connection to the California line is completed -- because most Southern California highway traffic must pass through Victorville to get to Las Vegas.

DesertXpress Vice President Andrew Mack said the company is placing an emphasis on the Las Vegas experience starting in Victorville, so parking at the station would be free, just as it would be in Las

Vegas, and passengers will be able to check their bags all the way through to their Las Vegas hotels at no additional cost.

Stone and Mack have not wavered from earlier estimates that the average ticket cost for a trip from Victorville to Las Vegas would be between \$50 and \$55. The executives stressed that the figure is an average and that during peak operational periods the price could be higher. There also will be higher-priced first-class seating on the trains.

"Basically, where we are is that the project has made great progress," Stone said. "We are close to conclusion of this entire environmental process and we are looking forward to getting started by the end of the year."

© [Las Vegas Sun](#), 2010, All Rights Reserved. [Job openings](#). Published since 1950. [Contact us](#) to report news, errors or for advertising opportunities.