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Jocelyn Rodriguez



NOTICE OF AVAILABILITY OF A DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

ACE Ceres–Merced Extension Project

PUBLIC REVIEW PERIOD: THURSDAY, APRIL 22, 2021 – MONDAY, JUNE 7, 2021

DATE: April 22, 2021
TO: Agencies, Organizations, and Interested Parties
FROM: San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission
SUBJECT: Notice of Availability of a Draft Environmental Impact Report (Draft EIR) for the ACE Ceres–Merced Extension Project (SCH #2018012014)

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission (SJRRRC), acting as lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), has prepared a Draft EIR for the Altamont Corridor Express (ACE) Ceres–Merced Extension Project (Project).

A. Project Description

SJRRRC proposes to extend ACE passenger rail service along approximately 34-miles from Ceres to Merced. The Proposed Project would include the development of the following facilities.

- The Ceres to Merced Extension Alignment, which consists of upgrades to track, new track, and bridges within the Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) Fresno Subdivision between Ceres and Merced.¹
- The Turlock, Livingston, and Merced Stations, which are located along the Ceres to Merced Extension Alignment.
- The Merced Layover & Maintenance Facility, which is located in north Merced to support extension operations.

Project Alignment, Stations, and Layover & Maintenance Facility

Ceres to Merced Extension Alignment

The proposed extension to Merced would construct a combination of track upgrades and new track, which would result in a second mainline on the UPRR Fresno Subdivision between Ceres and Merced. These proposed track upgrades and new track for the Ceres to Merced Extension Alignment would be located east or west of the existing mainline track. Approximately 26 miles of new mainline track will be installed as part of the Project and will be located between existing sidings, which will also be upgraded. The Ceres to Merced Extension Alignment would also require modifications to existing undercrossings, modifications to existing at-grade crossings, culvert extensions, and new bridges.

Stations

The Proposed Project includes the following three stations.

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

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Turlock Station

The Turlock Station would be constructed between the Fulkerth Road at-grade crossing and the West Canal Drive at-grade crossing in Turlock. This proposed station would connect to the Turlock Transit Center by a pedestrian bridge. The Turlock Transit Center operates as a hub for local and commuter bus services provided by Turlock Transit, Stanislaus Regional Transit, and Merced County Transit. The Turlock Station would consist of the following improvements.

- Construction of a station platform and fences outside of the two mainline tracks.
- Construction of street parking providing a total of 261 parking spaces. Use of up to 50 parking spaces in the Turlock Transit Center parking lot would provide a total of 311 parking spaces.
- Construction of a new pedestrian bridge, connecting the Turlock Transit Center and the station platform. The pedestrian bridge would cross over the railroad tracks and North Golden State Boulevard and would include associated elevators and stairways.

Livingston Station

The Livingston Station would be constructed in downtown Livingston, northeast of the Main Street grade crossing. The Livingston Station would consist of the following improvements.

- Construction of a station platform and fences outside of the two mainline tracks.
- Construction of a new surface parking lot providing a total of 238 parking spaces.
- Construction of a new pedestrian tunnel under the railroad tracks, including associated ramps and stairways.
- Construction of bus/shuttle drop off areas.
- Relocation of the detention basin and its associated facilities within the environmental footprint.

Merced Station

The Merced Station would be constructed adjacent to the UPRR Fresno Subdivision between R Street and O Street in downtown Merced. The Merced Station would consist of the following improvements.

- Construction of a station platform and fence between the new station track and existing mainline track.
- Construction of a new surface parking lot, providing a total of 380 parking spaces.

Merced Layover & Maintenance Facility

To support train layovers, storage, maintenance, and operations associated with the extension to Merced, a new layover facility would be constructed north of downtown Merced. Improvements that are part of the Merced Layover & Maintenance Facility are as follows:

- Construction of four new storage tracks, ranging from 0.4 to 0.5 mile, in an industrial area north of SR 59.
- Construction of a train wash facility.

- Construction of a 140,000 square foot maintenance building.
- Construction of a parking lot for employees and visitors.

Operations

Upon implementation of full operations for the Project, ACE train service originating/terminating in Merced would consist of the following service, which would be limited to weekdays:

- In the morning, three northbound trains would run from Merced Station to the Natomas/ Sacramento Airport Station (included within the approved Valley Rail Sacramento Extension Project). Passengers boarding in Merced and Stanislaus Counties and Southern San Joaquin County would either stay on the train in the direction of Sacramento or transfer onto the three westbound trains in the direction of San Jose at the North Lathrop Station (timed transfers). One westbound train would run from Merced Station to San Jose Diridon Station.
- In the evening, three southbound trains would run from Natomas/Sacramento Airport Station to Merced Station. ACE passengers returning from the Bay Area would transfer at the North Lathrop Station (timed transfers) onto the three Sacramento to Merced trains. One eastbound/southbound train would run from San Jose Diridon Station to Merced Station.

Overall, with operation of the Project, operation of the approved Valley Rail Sacramento Extension Project, and operation of the service between Ceres and Lathrop, ACE service would include the following trains (see Figure 2 for the conceptual service plan).

- One train in the morning and one train in the evening between the Merced Station and San Jose Diridon Station.
- Two trains in the morning and two trains in the evening between the Stockton Station and San Jose Diridon Station.
- One train in the morning and one train in the evening between Natomas/ Sacramento Airport Station and San Jose Diridon Station.
- Three trains in the morning and three train in the evening between the Merced Station and Natomas/Sacramento Airport Station.
- One train in the morning and one train in the evening between the Natomas/ Sacramento Airport Station and Stockton Station.

Full service between Ceres and Merced (e.g., four trains in the morning and four trains in the evening) is expected to commence by 2029. An initial service between Ceres and Merced, of up to two trains in the morning and up to two trains in the evening, is expected to commence by 2025.

B. Project Location

As shown in Figure 1, the Project spans Stanislaus and Merced Counties. SJRRC proposes to extend ACE passenger rail service from Ceres to Merced by constructing and upgrading tracks with the existing UPRR

Fresno Subdivision right-of-way (ROW), a total distance of approximately 34 miles. New stations and operating facilities would be constructed along the Ceres to Merced Extension Alignment. Project improvements include portions of the UPRR Fresno Subdivision ROW and additional ROW for new facilities (stations and layover yards) and for any construction or access areas located outside the ROW.

C. Alternatives

During preparation of the EIR, SJRRC also considered and evaluated alternatives to the Proposed Project.

- **Alternatives Analyzed at the Same Level of Detail as Proposed Project:** The Atwater Station Alternative was analyzed at an equal level of detail as the Proposed Project. The Atwater Station Alternative would include a station at Atwater instead of a station at Livingston.
- **Alternatives Analyzed at a Lesser Level of Detail:** The No Project Alternative, Merced Layover Facility Alternative, and Merced Station Alternative were analyzed at a lesser level of detail.
- **Alternatives Considered but Dismissed:** SJRRC also considered other alternatives, including operations alternatives, alignment and station alternatives, and multiple segment alternatives that were not carried forward for analysis in the EIR. A description of these alternatives, the screening process, and why they were dismissed from further analysis is included in the Draft EIR.

D. Potential Environmental Impacts

The Draft EIR analyzes the construction impacts, operational impacts, and cumulative impacts for each resource area.

The Proposed Project would result in overall regional benefits in terms of enhanced commuter and intercity passenger rail and transit access and connectivity in the San Joaquin Valley; support of transit-oriented development; creation of new transportation alternatives to automobile use, which would reduce vehicle miles travelled; improved air quality and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions; long-term health benefits for ACE riders, and residents and employees along the ACE corridor as a result of reduced emissions; and promotion of local and regional land use and transportation planning sustainability goals and initiatives.

The Proposed Project would result in the following significant and unavoidable impacts, even after implementation of mitigation: permanent conversion of important farmland, including a cumulatively considerable contribution to a potentially significant cumulative impact related to the permanent conversion of important farmland; and construction noise impacts at certain locations, including a cumulatively considerable contribution to a potentially significant cumulative impact related to construction noise.

The Proposed Project would result in less than significant impacts (including less than significant impacts with mitigation) on the following other resource areas: aesthetics, agricultural resources (except for permanent conversion of important farmland), air quality, biological resources, cultural resources and tribal cultural resources, energy, geology and soils, greenhouse gas emissions, hazardous materials, hydrology and water quality, land use and planning, noise (during operations), vibration, population and housing, public services, recreation, safety and security, transportation, and utilities and service systems.

E. Hazardous Waste Sites

Portions of the Proposed Project are located on or in close proximity to areas with hazardous materials contamination compiled pursuant to Government Code Section 65962.5 (Cortese List).

F. Availability of Draft Environmental Impact Report

The Draft EIR and the documents incorporated by reference are available on SJRRC's website at <https://acerail.com/merced-extension-eir>. A printed copy of the Draft EIR and the documents incorporated by reference are available for public viewing at the SJRRC offices at 949 East Channel Street in Stockton, California during normal office hours (Monday through Friday 4:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.).

In addition, a printed copy of the Draft EIR is also available for public viewing at the following locations:

- City of Turlock
156 S. Broadway, Suite 120
Turlock, CA 95380
Office hours: Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
- City of Merced, City Clerk's Office
678 West 18th Street, 1st Floor
Merced, CA 95340
Office hours: Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
(closed during the 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m. lunch hour)

G. Virtual Open House Meetings

SJRRC will hold three virtual open house meetings (webinars) to provide information about the Draft EIR and respond to general questions about the environmental analysis. A presentation summarizing the Proposed Project and the Draft EIR will be provided, and staff will be available to answer questions. While staff will be available to answer questions of a general nature at this meeting; all formal comments on the Draft EIR must be submitted in writing for consideration (see below).

Information about how to join the virtual open house meetings will be provided on the Project webpage (<https://acerail.com/merced-extension-eir>). Visit the Project webpage to sign up to receive email reminders for these meetings.

Three virtual open house meetings will be held on the following dates and times. All three virtual open house meetings will be identical in format and content.

- Virtual Open House Meeting #1 - Thursday, May 13, 2021, from 3:00 pm – 4:30 pm
- Virtual Open House Meeting #2 - Thursday, May 13, 2021, from 6:00 pm – 7:30 pm
- Virtual Open House Meeting #3 - Tuesday, May 18, 2021, from 6:00 pm – 7:30 pm

H. Comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Report

The public review period will be from April 22, 2021 to June 7, 2021. Comments on the Draft EIR must be received no later than 5:00 p.m. on the last day of the Draft EIR public review period, and can be submitted by any of the following methods:

- **Mail:** San Joaquin Regional Rail Commission
Attn: Dan Leavitt, Manager of Regional Initiatives
949 East Channel Street
Stockton, CA 95202
- **Email:** MercedEXTComments@acerail.com
Please include “ACE Ceres-Merced Extension Project” in the email subject heading.
- **Webpage:** Comments can be submitted using the form at the end of the Project webpage.
Project webpage: <https://acerail.com/merced-extension-eir/>

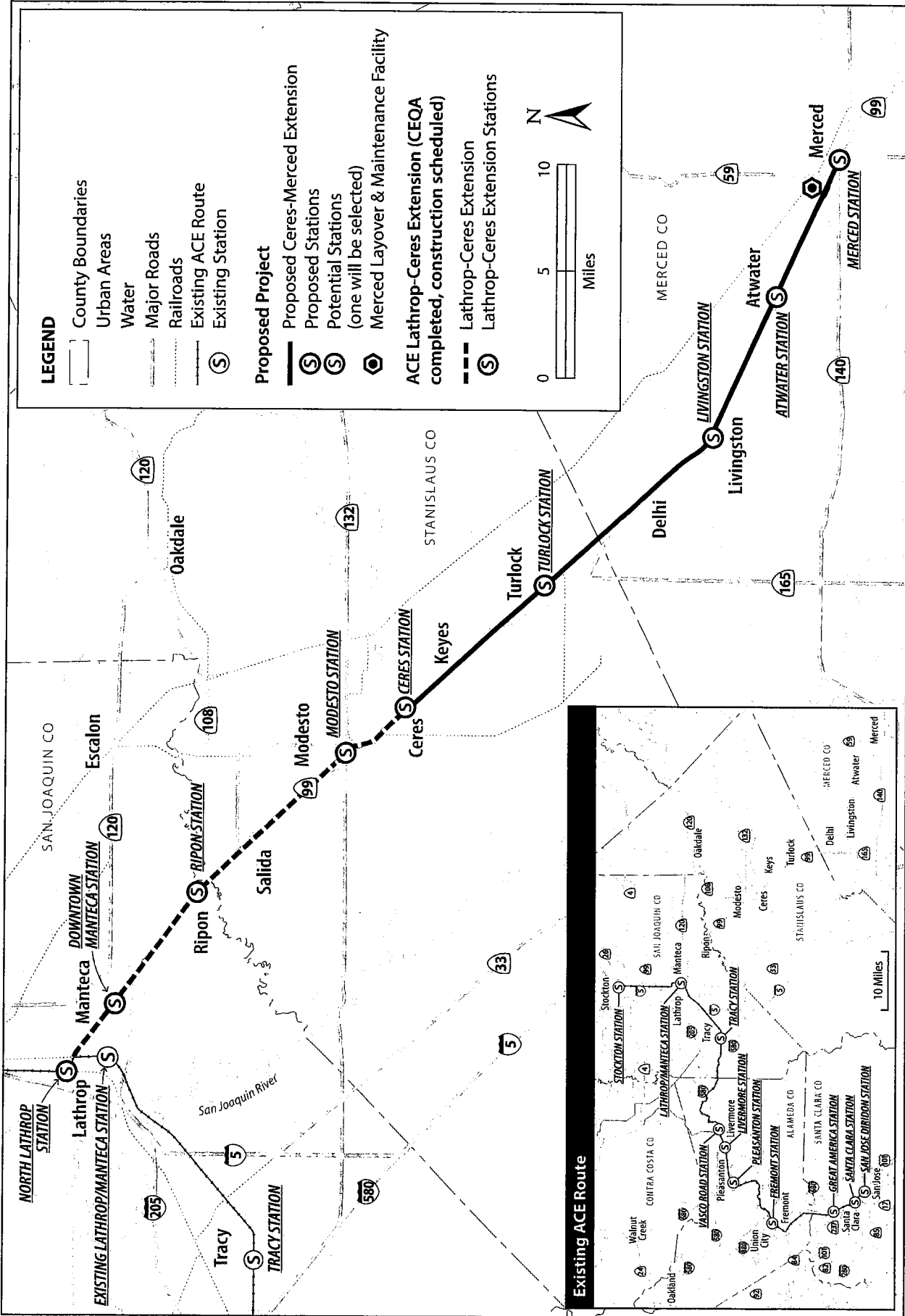
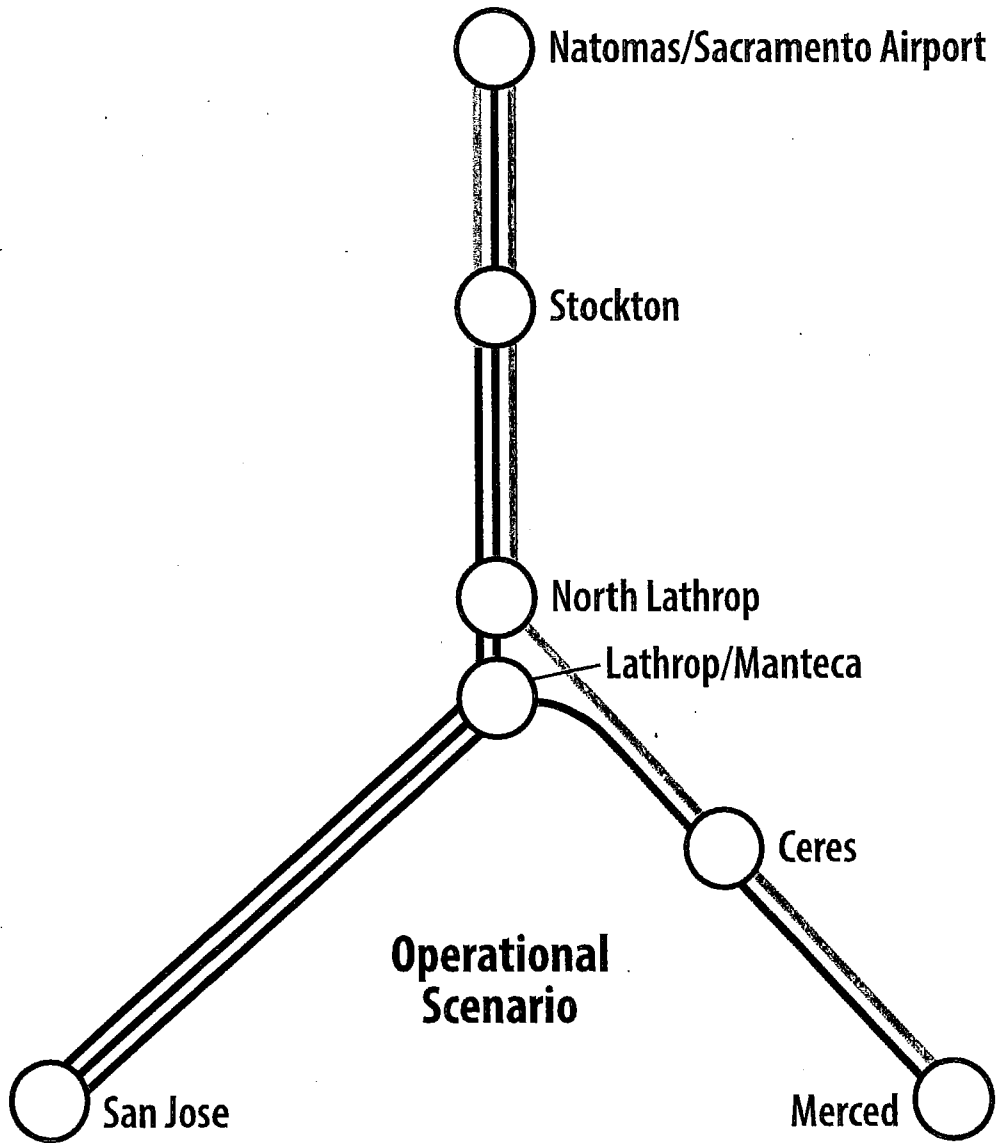







Figure 1
Project Location
ACE Ceres-Merced Extension Project
Notice of Availability



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Legend

-  Merced—San Jose (1 round trip; leaving Merced in the AM & returning in the PM)
-  Natomas/Sacramento Airport—Stockton (1 round trip; leaving Natomas/Sacramento Airport in the AM & returning in the PM)
-  Merced—Natomas/Sacramento Airport (3 round trips; leaving Merced in the AM & returning in the PM)
-  Stockton—San Jose (2 round trips; leaving Stockton in the AM & returning in the PM)
-  Natomas/Sacramento Airport—San Jose (1 round trip; leaving Natomas/Sacramento Airport in the AM & returning in the PM)

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Figure 2
Conceptual Service Plan
 ACE Ceres-Merced Extension Project
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