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## **New light-rail projects worth almost half-billion to builders**

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Sacramento's light-rail expansion could turn out to be a powerful economic engine in the region's construction industry.

Extension projects worth almost a half-billion dollars are well under way, others are planned during the next 10 years, and land-use officials are laying the groundwork to encourage development or redevelopment worth up to about \$6 billion near light-rail stations.

The light-rail expansion is the biggest in the Sacramento Regional Transit District's history. Here's what's coming, from the most imminent to the furthest down the time line:

- Track is already laid for a new South Line extension from downtown to Meadowview Road and stations are under construction. The new line will be open by October next year. The \$222 million project will add 6.3 miles of track to the 20.6-mile system.
- Construction has started on a new extension from Rancho Cordova to Folsom and will be finished by the end of 2004. An extension from the line downtown to the Sacramento Amtrak station is scheduled for completion in April 2005. The Folsom line will add 10.2 miles, and the Amtrak extension will add 0.7 miles to the system. Together, the projects are now estimated at about \$255 million, although that figure may change.
- Preliminary engineering and environmental studies should be completed by October for the next extension of the South line, which will go from Meadowview Road to a site near Highway 99 and Calvine Road. Construction would begin in mid- to late-2005 and be completed in 2007 or 2008. The initial cost estimate of \$185 million will probably need to be updated.
- An extension from downtown to the Sacramento International Airport is on the drawing board. Regional Transit officials are looking at alternative routes, and they're also considering other modes of transportation besides light rail, such as bus rapid transit. Preliminary engineering and environmental studies should be completed in 2005. Final design work would then begin, and construction could start as early as 2007 and finish three years later.
- The next likely extension would be on the South line, this time from Calvine and Highway 99 to the city of Elk Grove. Transit officials are looking at three alternative routes and have not designated a time frame for this project yet.

Stacy and Witbeck Inc. in Alameda is the general contractor for the South Line project to Meadowview. Azteca Construction Inc. in Rancho Cordova is building three of the stations, and Allen L. Bender Inc. in West Sacramento and Stacy & Witbeck are each building two.

"It's a nice project for us," says Brian Bender, vice president of Allen L. Bender. "It involves a lot of labor and concrete work, which is our specialty." His firm, whose contract was worth about \$5.6 million, plans to bid on other parts of the light-rail expansion.

On the Folsom extension, Herzog Contracting Corp., based in St. Joseph, Mo., is the general contractor for double-tracking the Brighton-to-Watt and Mather Field-to-Sunrise portions. MCM Construction Inc. in Sacramento, which specializes in highway and bridge building, is the general contractor for what's called the "Bee Bridge," a bridge just south of the Sacramento Bee complex in midtown.

The estimated costs for both the South Line and Folsom extensions include equipment as well as design and construction. One of the biggest-ticket items is the light-rail vehicles themselves, which will cost a combined \$95 million for the Meadowview and Folsom extensions.

Here's the breakdown: As far as big-ticket construction items go for those projects, Regional Transit budgeted about \$94 million for laying the track, \$38.3 million for building the stations, \$27.3 million on final design and engineering and \$14 million on construction management. Those are combined totals from the Folsom and Meadowview budgets. The remainder of the money is designated for equipment, installation, environmental work and right-of-way acquisition, among other things.

The extension to Meadowview is under budget and on schedule. The Folsom project, though, may end up costing more than the \$209 million transit officials originally budgeted. Regional Transit spokesman Mike Wiley says estimates now go up to \$255 million, but officials are looking at ways they can reduce costs. Building a light-duty maintenance facility, versus a full-blown maintenance building, would cut the cost by \$10 million

Officials are also looking for funding sources to fill the gap between the earlier cost estimates and the final price tag. Wiley says the district will ask other jurisdictions to pitch in for certain parts of the project. Officials are also exploring shifting dollars from other projects to the light-rail extension. They will determine a final budget and revenue sources in the next six weeks, Wiley said.

Cost estimates have gone up because the project hit some delays, and building costs have gone up in the meantime. Regional Transit, for instance, had to abandon its chosen site for a maintenance facility on Aerojet property because environmental studies revealed a greater amount of wetlands than expected and lots of elderberry bushes, which provide habitat for the endangered long-horned valley elderberry beetle. Officials now are looking for another site. Another delay came about when the district had to do additional planning and environmental reviews for changing the design on 7th Street. Merchants were concerned about the removal of on-street parking and the location of a station in the original design, so transit officials went back to the drawing board.

The ripple effect: Construction related to the light-rail extensions won't end after the last tracks are laid and stations are built. Transit officials are working with cities and Sacramento County to incorporate land-use planning policies to encourage development of stores, housing and offices near 21 stations. The idea is to create communities where people are more likely to use public transportation, ride their bikes or walk to destinations.

Development capacity around the stations totals \$1.5 billion on the South Line, \$3 billion in the corridor to Folsom and \$1.4 billion on the northeast line from downtown to the Marconi station, according to the Regional Transit District's "Transit for Livable Communities" study.

Twelve of the stations are under construction or will be built as part of the light-rail expansion

None of this will happen overnight. Although transit-oriented development has won general support nationally and in California, it's fairly new in Sacramento. Developers greet new products cautiously, so public assistance will be necessary to help spark these types of projects, according to the "Transit for Livable Communities" study. Right now, public funds are fragmented and decentralized, the report notes. Another challenge is that the light-rail lines run through already-developed areas where there are multiple landowners, and only seven stations are in redevelopment districts, where government agencies can use eminent domain and special funding mechanisms to prod redevelopment.

Expansion of the light-rail system itself also will move slowly. Some of the hardest work is done before ground is broken. Planning and cobbling all the financial resources together takes years, and competition for funding is fierce, Wiley said.

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