

The Merced High-Speed Rail Survey

Tracking Community Perspectives, Preferences,
and Public Participation



COMMUNITY AND
LABOR CENTER

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Background

The Central Valley is facing unprecedented economic transitions, with the emergence of new growth sectors and the retraction of critical economic drivers such as agriculture and fossil fuel production. Over the past few years, federal and state programs generated significant investments to respond to the changing climate while creating opportunities for economic transformation. While most federal climate funds have been discontinued or clawed back under the new administration, the investment opportunities exposed an important gap. Those most impacted by rapid economic transitions—residents and workers—have little influence in determining how climate investments should be prioritized in their communities. Effectively leveraging climate investments to make meaningful differences in the lives of vulnerable populations requires a shift from traditional economic development and top-down economic strategies.

This brief is part of a series that examines community and labor perspectives on trends and transitions in the Central Valley in the face of increased climate investment and the emergence of new energy and carbon technologies which have the potential to significantly change the Central Valley's environment, workforce, and economy. The series will culminate in the publication of the Valley Plan for Climate Investments and Technology, a comprehensive accounting of the preferences, needs, and awareness of Central Valley residents and workers in frontline communities on climate investments and emerging economic sectors that address climate change. Based on representative surveys and targeted stakeholder discussions, the plan will offer a unique lens for understanding community and labor perspectives that can help

shape investment decisions and workforce strategies that advance sustainable development, promote high-road jobs, and protect the health and safety of communities.

The Tracking Community Perspectives briefs examine community preferences on one of the state's largest climate investment programs—High Speed Rail—as the state begins station development and design.

Report Highlights and Community Preferences

- **First set of representative surveys of residents impacted by High-Speed Rail in the San Joaquin Valley**
- **More local residents would likely use High-Speed Rail if subsidized**
- **Preferences for job creation and reduced pollution**
- **Preferences for local economic development and cultural amenities**
- **Strong support for community participation in the design of the Merced High-Speed Rail station and the budgeting process**
- **Community Benefit Agreements should focus on job creation and affordable housing**

Figure 1. Survey Census Tracts Intersected by the Currently Proposed Location of the High-Speed Rail (HSR) Station



Introduction

The state has allocated over \$13 billion dollars and pledged an additional \$1 billion annually through 2045 to support the development and construction of the California High-Speed Rail (HSR) system, which will eventually connect the San Francisco Bay Area to the Los Angeles basin via the Central Valley. Construction is already well-underway in the San Joaquin Valley with projects spanning Madera, Fresno, Kings, Tulare, and Kern counties. Many of the viaducts, overpasses, and underpasses on which the first 119 miles of high-speed rail track will run have been built (Burman 2025).

The northern stretch of the high-speed rail project is at a pivotal moment with a recent proposal to shift the location or delay development of the current northern terminus of the High-Speed Rail Project in Merced, either of which would require amending current legislation mandating construction of the downtown Merced to Bakersfield portion of the rail prior to

commencing other phases of the project (California Air Resources Board 2024). Despite this uncertainty, the City of Merced has begun development of the Merced Station Area Plan to define the land use, circulation, and infrastructure that will accompany the High-Speed Rail Merced Station. The Merced stop is seen as an important connector station linking High-Speed Rail with the Altamont Corridor Express (ACE) Rail and the Amtrack San Joaquin lines. The Merced Station will also connect visitors to UC Merced and Yosemite National Park.

Programs funded through the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF), such as the high-speed rail project, must “maximize economic, environmental, and public health benefits” and “direct investment toward the most disadvantaged communities and households in the state” (California High-Speed Rail Authority 2022). The High-Speed Rail Authority has stated its intent that the rail stations “transform cities, spur economic development, and create community hubs within the heart of our state” (California State Legislature 2022). The City of Merced has identified its High Speed Rail Station Area Plan as an important opportunity “to turn the state and federal investment in high speed rail into a local economic engine that will drive new investment downtown and position Merced as a destination and crossroads for travelers as well as a desirable place for people to be, live, and work” (City of Merced 2025).

The development of the Central Valley HSR stations brings the promise of economic transformation in a region that has historically faced underinvestment, poverty, and climate impacts, but also has the potential to displace existing residents and drive-up housing and other household costs. High-speed rail may benefit California residents by creating jobs, boosting local economies through development around stations, providing easier access to jobs and education, reducing commute times, and supporting cleaner, more efficient regional travel. The

station design component of the high-speed rail project provides an opportunity to advance economic, environmental, and public health benefits in Merced. To meet the state's transformative objectives for station development and avoid negative outcomes, residents in hub communities should be engaged in the design process and identify the economic and community benefits they believe should be advanced through station development.

This report assesses the needs of residents in the High-Speed Rail (HSR) hub city of Merced. The University of California, Merced Community and Labor Center partnered with UC Merced undergraduate and graduate students and the Communities for a New California (CNC)—a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Merced—to conduct direct, door-to-door surveys in four contiguous census tracts near the Merced HSR station (see Figure 1). By working with a trusted local community-based organization (CBO) and university students from similar communities, the survey team was able to engage hard-to-reach residents in vulnerable and disadvantaged neighborhoods that have historically been excluded from civic processes. Using a representative and random sample design, the survey team contacted 407 residents, resulting in a margin of error of +/- 5 percentage points. The household-based surveys were carried out in-person in English and Spanish in census tracts identified as disadvantaged using the CalEnviroScreen 4.0 screening tool in the fall of 2024 (between October and December). The State of California classifies disadvantaged communities as census tracts receiving a score in the top 25th percentile on CalEnviroScreen, a tool that ranks census tracts using environmental, health, and socioeconomic indices to identify California communities that are most affected by pollution and vulnerable to its effects.

The four contiguous census tracts sampled are among the most pollution burdened in the state, all ranking in the 94th percentile or higher of the over 8,000 tracts in California on the CalEnviroScreen ranking system, and in the 89th percentile for air pollution. Combined, the population is 69 percent Latino, with a majority of residents reporting an annual household income of less than \$50,000, well below the state average of \$96,000 (nearly a third of the census tracts household income falls below \$25,000). About two-thirds of the residents rent the household property where they reside (see Appendix for demographic characteristics of the sampled population and the corresponding census tracts).

The California High-Speed Rail Authority has historically received an automatic annual appropriation of 25 percent of the state's Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF). In 2025, the California legislature adopted a policy that would allocate \$1 billion annually to the High-Speed Rail project for the next 20 years from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund and the reauthorized cap-and-invent program. This funding is sufficient to complete the Central Valley segment between Merced and Bakersfield by 2033.

California law (SB 535 and AB 1550) mandates that at least 25 percent of the state's \$30 billion Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund is invested in projects located within, and benefiting individuals living in, disadvantaged census tracts like those sampled in this study. State investments in hub communities can count toward these expenditures. However, the investment preferences of impacted communities are rarely systematically gathered as they are in the representative survey presented in this brief.

The results of this survey provide critical insights into the awareness, preferences, and needs of disadvantaged residents in Merced to guide the next steps in high-speed rail design

and development and help meet the state's climate investment obligations to provide economic, environmental, and public health benefits to disadvantaged communities. By integrating the insights from this report with the design and development of the Merced High Speed Rail Station, state and local stakeholders can uplift the important role residents should play in shaping development projects in a way that reflects local needs and aspirations and complies with the state's obligations to invest in disadvantaged communities.

Basic Knowledge and Planned Use of High-Speed Rail

This first section reports Merced residents' basic knowledge of rail station development as well as planned usage of the rail system once operational. Information on familiarity and usage can help the state and city identify additional outreach needs and strategies for promoting local use of the station and railway with local community organizations.

In Merced, most people are not fully aware of the high-speed rail station project. Less than 25 percent of residents stated they are fully aware. Even though majorities have heard of the project, most do not know the full details, demonstrating a need for more community outreach. This is particularly important as the High-Speed Rail Authority, the local city council, and the state legislature are poised to make critical decisions about the timing and location of the Merced Station development. Having an informed populace participating constructively in complex problem-solving can help decision-makers make better informed and more inclusive decisions about rail location, timing, and other relevant considerations.

Table 1. Which of the Following Responses Best Describes Your Awareness of the Development of the High-Speed Rail Station in Merced?

	<u>Percent</u>
I am somewhat aware of the project	45%
I am not aware of the project	32%
I am fully aware of the project	24%
n= 406	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

Table 2. Do You Plan on Using the High-Speed Rail Once it Becomes Operational?

	<u>Percent</u>
Definitely	38%
Probably	32%
Not sure	20%
Probably not	5%
Definitely not	6%
n=405	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

Table 3. How Likely Would You Use the High-Speed Rail if There Were a Discounted Rate for Local Residents?

	<u>Percent</u>
Very Likely	53%
Likely	29%
Somewhat likely	14%
Not likely	5%
n=407	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

Table 4. How do You Plan on Using the High-Speed Rail? (Check All That Apply)

	<u>Percent</u>
Visiting family or friends	62%
Traveling for leisure	56%
Attending events or activities	38%
Connecting to other forms of public transit	34%
Commuting to work or school	25%
Business travel	19%
Other	3%

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

Tables 2 and 3 show that there is substantial interest from Merced residents in disadvantaged census tracts to use high speed rail with majorities stating likely usage, while Table 4 illustrates the types of foreseen usage. As Table 3 suggests, subsidizing public transportation in low-income communities is one of the most effective ways to support disadvantaged populations by increasing their use of public transport systems. In Merced, providing discounted high-speed rail fares for residents is not only essential for boosting public transportation usage but also for making the high-speed railway services more affordable to struggling families and individuals. As illustrated in Table 3, offering discounted train fares would highly motivate at least 53% of residents to use the high-speed rail. Twenty-nine percent of respondents indicated that they would likely use the train if subsidized, while 13.5% were somewhat likely to do so. Only 5% of respondents stated that discounted fares would not influence their decision to use the high-speed train. These findings highlight that implementing fare discounts for local residents has significant potential to increase ridership once the high-speed rail becomes operational, ultimately enhancing the overall use of public transportation.

Connecting this finding to research showing that transit systems improve mobility and expand access to local labor markets and economic opportunities, increased public access to transportation services may have substantial and multi-dimensional benefits for residents in Merced. Moreover, high-speed rail usage has considerable environmental and health benefits that will enhance the overall well-being of residents. By reducing reliance on personal vehicles, it can lower carbon dioxide emissions from car exhaust, thereby decreasing air pollution and its harmful effects on human health and the climate. Given these advantages, it is crucial for local authorities and high-speed rail planners to invest in fare subsidies mechanisms that support residents' access to and use of the high-speed rail system. A discount could make the rail more accessible and popular among the local community, especially for lower-income residents. It is a clear opportunity for advocates to push for equity-based fares that can help fulfil the goals of SB 535 and AB 1550 requiring a significant portion of greenhouse gas reduction funds to benefit individuals living in disadvantaged census tracts like those sampled in this study.

Concerns With High-Speed Rail

The survey next assessed residents' opinions on issues of concern related to the construction and operation of the high-speed rail station. This information is useful to identify and implement potential project elements and mitigation measures when designing and constructing the station to alleviate those concerns. The survey results in Table 5 show that the biggest concern people have about the Merced High-Speed Rail Station project is rising housing and funding costs, followed by environmental impacts in already burdened neighborhoods. That is a clear signal that people are anxious about being priced out of their own community. Only about 18% said they had no concerns at all. This data suggests that station development and

Table 5. Which of the Following Concerns do You Have About the Merced High-Speed Rail Station Project? (Check All That Apply)

	<u>Percent</u>
Rising Housing/Rental Cost Concerns	48%
Cost and Funding Concerns	48%
Environmental Impact	41%
Noise Pollution Concerns	31%
Traffic Congestion Concerns	29%
Negative Economic Impact on Local Businesses Concerns	19%
No Concerns	18%
Lowering Property Value	16%

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

design should include anti-displacement measures and strategies as well as effective mitigation for noise during construction activities, traffic, and other environmental impacts. Equitable transit-oriented development strategies can avoid displacement and gentrification through the creation or preservation of affordable housing, the adoption of strong tenant protections, initiatives that connect existing residents to opportunities created by new transit infrastructure, strategies that preserve existing businesses, and robust community engagement that centers residents and community-based organizations in shaping the vision for the project.

Community Benefits and Preferences

The next section contains information about factors residents weigh in determining whether to support local development projects, as well as the specific benefits they would like associated with the high-speed rail station. Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) are one tool that developers, local governments, community-based organizations, and the High-Speed Rail Authority can use to promote equitable development and ensure that station construction and

design improves the quality of life of nearby residents. CBAs often include both workforce standards and investments in community projects, services, and programs. Such agreements can be particularly useful to ensure that large developments using public funds align with the needs of existing residents and workers. The information in this section can guide potential land uses, labor and workforce standards, and design components to maximize community support for the development and inform potential community benefit agreements attached to the project.

When asked to weigh different factors that may influence their support for potential new developments (such as High-Speed Rail) in their locality, Merced residents most valued economic benefits of such projects, followed closely by environmental impacts (see Table 6). About two-thirds considered job creation and job quality to be very important factors in their support for new projects. This included job accessibility for local residents (71.9%), job quality (70.05%), job safety (66.83%), and the overall number of jobs created (64.9%). These responses reflect the economic conditions of California's Central Valley, a region marked by high unemployment, precarious employment in sectors like agriculture, warehousing, and meatpacking, elevated poverty rates, and unstable household conditions (Flores 2019).

Beyond employment, respondents also emphasized other critical community benefits. For example, 63.1% considered the provision of services or benefits to local residents as very important, while 52.6% valued the amount of local tax revenue generated but show slightly less support when the benefits are mediated through local government. In addition to economic factors, environmental externalities and improvements also weighed heavily in respondents' evaluations. A significant number of residents rated the following as very important: that the

development does not increase water pollution (67.1%), does not increase local safety risks such as fires, leaks, or explosions (64.9%), and provides environmental benefits (58.2%). Overall, these responses indicate that when evaluating new development projects—such as those related to high-speed rail—Merced residents would consider a combination of job creation, improvements to material living conditions, potential environmental harms, and possible ecological benefits as very important aspects of new developments in the city and its environs.

The percentages show that job-related factors are the key determinants of community attitudes towards new developments. Environmental concerns, most especially the protection of water quality and assurance of safety from hazards like fires, leaks, or explosions constitute the next category of variables likely to shape community acceptance of new projects. However, community attitudes towards the environmental impacts of these projects are not linear. According to the survey results, respondents prioritized other benefits, such as the services the projects bring to the community, over some significant environmental concerns like air pollution and odor. Other environmental concerns like traffic congestion, noise pollution, and increasing greenhouse gas emissions were also concerning to respondents but ranked lower compared to other environmental issues. Within the other benefits category, the percentages show that respondents placed greater importance on community benefits overall than the tax revenues from such projects.

Table 6. If a New Project or Development Was Coming to Your Community, How Important Would the Following Factors be to You in Deciding Whether or Not You're in Support on a Scale Of 1- Not at All Important, 2-Somewhat Important, 3- Important, 4- Very Important?

	<u>Very Important</u>	<u>Important</u>	<u>Somewhat Important</u>	<u>Not at all Important</u>
Accessibility of jobs to local residents	72%	24%	3%	1%
Quality of jobs created	70%	24%	5%	1%
Safety of jobs created	67%	27%	5%	2%
The development does not increase water pollution	67%	25%	5%	3%
Number of jobs created	65%	29%	5%	2%
The development does not increase local safety risks such as fires, leaks, or explosions	65%	26%	6%	4%
Services or benefits the development provides to local residents	63%	31%	6%	1%
The development does not increase air pollution	58%	31%	9%	3%
Environmental benefits	58%	31%	9%	2%
The development does not increase greenhouse gas emissions	58%	29%	9%	5%
The development does not increase local traffic and congestion	56%	29%	11%	5%
The development does not emit odors	55%	31%	11%	4%
The amount of local tax	53%	33%	9%	5%
The development does not create noise pollution	53%	32%	10%	5%

n=398-404

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

Table 7 shows that a large portion of respondents are interested in new potential developments to accompany high-speed rail; over 75% of residents indicate interest in commercial and retail businesses, while over 70% would like to see more affordable housing, healthcare facilities and office spaces in the area. Participants also largely support the development of community-focused services—over two-thirds of respondents support the inclusion of community (69.0%) and job training centers (68.3%), and over half support the development of local parks and green spaces (56.3%).

Table 7. What Kind of Development Would You Like to See Around the Merced High-Speed Rail Station? (Check All That Apply)

	<u>Percent</u>
Retail stores	78%
Restaurants	78%
Affordable residential housing	73%
Healthcare facilities	72%
Office spaces	71%
Community center/event center	69%
Job training center	68%
Parks and green spaces	56%
Welcome center, art, cultural center, galleries (culturally relevant)	47%
Meeting spaces	44%
EV charging stations	42%
Other	6%
n=407	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

Table 8. How Important do You Think it Will be for the High-Speed Rail Authority and Local Planners to Create the Following Forms of Transit Between the Merced High-Speed Rail Station and Surrounding Communities?

	<u>Very</u> <u>Important</u>	<u>Important</u>	<u>Somewhat</u> <u>Important</u>	<u>Not at all</u> <u>Important</u>
Pedestrian walking paths to High-Speed Rail Station	64%	26%	6%	3%
Bicycle paths to High-Speed Rail Station	59%	31%	7%	3%
Frequent low-cost public bus service to High-Speed Rail Station	65%	29%	5%	1%
Community ride-share program	55%	33%	10%	2%
n= 399-405				

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

Table 8 reflects the overall interest in establishing good and reliable commuting options between the high-speed rail station and neighborhoods in Merced to ensure that residents can access and use the new railway. This survey sampled respondents’ opinions on the four most common and feasible transportation modes that can connect neighborhoods in Merced to the

high-speed rail station. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of interest regarding government investments in pedestrian walkways, bicycle paths, reliable low-cost public bus services, and community rideshare programs to link communities to the railway station. Nearly sixty-five percent of respondents preferred that authorities prioritize investments in pedestrian walkways and frequent, low-cost public bus services connecting neighborhoods to the high-speed rail. Respondents ranked bicycle paths and community rideshare programs as the second and third most important transit options, with preference rates of 59.36% and 54.64% respectively.

These preferences may reflect existing local transportation challenges in Merced. The order of preference highlights other infrastructure and public service developments that residents would like to see alongside the rail station such as retail stores, parks, restaurants, and other projects outlined in Table 8. Furthermore, these transit options will enhance access to other development projects associated with the high-speed railway, contributing to overall urban mobility and connectivity in Merced.

Having an enhanced understanding of what Merced city residents expect from the high-speed rail project is valuable in guiding local administrators and highspeed rail authority policies. As shown in the Table 9, the first major benefit of the highspeed rail is increased employment opportunities. Respondents identified employment opportunities as the primary benefit of the high-speed rail—specifically, its potential to create or open the doors to good jobs with benefits for local residents. This was followed by improved connectivity to regional airports, increased tourism and local business activity, and reduced travel times to major cities. Environmental benefits and other unspecified advantages ranked lower on the list. Once again,

Table 9. Which of the Following Would You Like to See in Terms of the High-Speed Rail Benefiting Your Community? (Check All That Apply)

	<u>Percent</u>
Increase employment opportunities for good jobs with benefits for local residents	82%
Improved connectivity to regional airports	72%
Increased tourism and local business activity	67%
Reduced travel times to major cities	65%
Enhanced transportation options for residents	60%
Environmental benefits (e.g., reduced carbon emissions)	55%

n=407

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

these preferences highlight the high rates of unemployment residents in Merced face.

Addressing this concern through the high-speed rail project could significantly impact the local economy and improve overall community well-being.

Gathering public opinions on the types of benefits residents would like to see included in a CBA can promote more effective community benefit agreement processes and facilitate increased community trust in and acceptance of local development projects. As shown in Table 10, respondents identified job creation as the most desired outcome for a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA), selected by 90.39% (367) of respondents. Affordable housing ranked second, selected by 86.45% (351) participants. Healthcare services (80.05%) and local business support (79.8%) were also highly valued by respondents. Additionally, responses on educational programs (78.33%) and environmental protections (75.86%) highlighted significant interest in sustainable development and educational opportunities. Among the less popular aspects, community facilities (73.4%) were considered important but not prioritized as highly as other

Table 10. A Community Benefit Agreement (CBA) is a Contract Between a Developer and Community Groups Detailing the Project’s Benefits for the Local Community. What Aspects Would You Want to See Included in a CBA? (Check All That Apply)

	<u>Percent</u>
Job creation	90%
Affordable housing	86%
Healthcare services	80%
Local business support	80%
Educational programs	78%
Environmental protections	76%
Community facilities	73%
Small business support	59%
Other	3%
n= 405	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

Table 11. One Example of Funding is the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund. The State of California Uses Money From This Fund to Help Communities Deal With the Impacts of Climate Change. How Important do You Think it is for the State to Use This Money in the Following Areas in Your Community?

	<u>Very</u> <u>Important</u>	<u>Important</u>	<u>Somewhat</u> <u>Important</u>	<u>Not at all</u> <u>Important</u>
Increasing access to clean drinking water	73%	22%	4%	1%
Job creation	68%	25%	6%	1%
Reducing air pollution	64%	29%	6%	2%
Job training	61%	29%	8%	1%
Protections from extreme heat	61%	29%	8%	2%
Flood control	57%	29%	11%	3%
Creating more parks and recreational spaces	55%	34%	8%	2%
High-speed rail development	50%	34%	11%	5%
n= 396-404				

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

categories. Finally, respondents viewed small business support (58.62%) as less important compared to general business support.

Table 11 provides valuable information on how disadvantaged communities would like to see Greenhouse Gas Reduction Funds invested in their neighborhoods. As mentioned in the introduction, at least 25% of the state’s GGRF must benefit individuals living in disadvantaged census tracts. Merced would benefit from increased climate investment due to current low investment rates and the high vulnerability of its population. The results in Table 11 indicate that respondents prioritize using the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund for clean drinking water access (73% consider it “very important”), job creation (68%), air pollution reduction (64%), job training (61%), and protection from extreme heat (61%), highlighting these as the most urgent needs in their communities. Flood control (57%), creating parks and recreational spaces (55.5%), and high-speed rail development (50%) are also considered important but with slightly lower levels of support. Notably, very few respondents rated any of these areas as “not important at all,” suggesting broad agreement on their relevance, though with varying degrees of urgency. The responses in Table 11 provide relevant information for the High-Speed Rail Authority to connect GGRF investments to benefits prioritized by residents in Merced.

Civic Engagement in High-Speed Rail

For communities to benefit from new projects coming to their neighborhoods, they must be actively engaged throughout all stages of the implementation process. This involvement is essential for establishing Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) that protect and promote community interests. However, for such meaningful engagements to happen, the members of the community involved must also be willing to attend community benefit

Table 12. Would You be Willing to Come to a Meeting About the Benefits of Having a High-Speed Rail Station?

	<u>Percent</u>
Yes	50%
Maybe	33%
No	17%
n=406	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

Table 13. Should the City of Merced Ensure That There is Extensive Community Participation and Community Representation on the Merced High-Speed Rail Station Area Plan?

	<u>Percent</u>
Yes	91%
No	9%
n=407	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

meetings and participate in discussions on these issues. As Table 12 indicates, many Merced residents are interested in engaging in such processes. Half of the respondents expressed interest in attending a meeting about the benefits of the proposed high-speed rail. And about one-third were uncertain, while a smaller portion (17.24%) stated that they would not attend such meetings. The results in this table indicate the strong willingness among Merced residents to attend community benefit meetings. Investing in community-based organizations and other trusted community groups may be the best way to ensure robust participation in public deliberations and civic engagement on rail station development.

Given that many Merced residents expressed a strong willingness to attend meetings to discuss the benefits of the high-speed rail in their communities—as reflected in their responses

in Table 12—it is evident that they would also strongly support extensive community participation and representation in matters related to the high-speed rail. This is confirmed by the responses in Table 13. Table 13 indicates that local residents (most impacted by rail station development) strongly support deep, sustained community engagement and participation throughout the design and construction of the Merced High Speed Rail Station. Indeed, when directly asked about whether the City of Merced should extensively engage with local residents, respondents overwhelmingly respond affirmatively (with 91% indicating “Yes”).

The survey asked the community about interest in participatory budgeting for the high-speed rail station. The county already has experience with participatory budgeting in the late 2010s in Supervisor District 2 with discretionary funds. Table 14 shows a clear public mandate to enact a democratic and community-based budgeting model for the investments in high-speed rail station design and construction.

Merced residents express a clear interest in community engagement; however, as shown in Table 15, certain obstacles may prevent participants from attending local meetings. Among these, respondents identify work schedule conflicts or lack of time off as the most common obstacle, emphasizing the importance of scheduling such community events at times which best meet the needs of local residents. Beyond this logistical challenge, residents also voice concerns about access to information and trust that their input will be valued. These findings highlight the importance of transparent, clear and proactive communication between local communities, state officials, union organizers and community-based organizations to fully engage the public around their most salient concerns.

Table 14. Would You Like to See the City of Merced Implement Participatory Community Budgeting for the Use of the High-Speed Rail Funds?

	<u>Percent</u>
Yes	93%
No	7%
n=404	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

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Table 15. What is the Biggest Obstacle That Might Prevent You From Attending a Local Meeting About the Issues We Have Discussed Today? (Check All That Apply)

	<u>Percent</u>
Work schedule conflicts or lack of time off from work	45%
Limited access to information about the meeting	44%
Lack of trust in the process or belief that my input will not be valued	34%
Childcare responsibilities or lack of affordable childcare	27%
Concerns about the meeting being conducted in a language that is not understood	24%
Health or mobility issues	23%
Lack of affordable transportation to the meeting location	23%
Other (please specify)	4%
n=388	

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The central themes emerging from this representative community survey of priority populations offer valuable insights on how to develop the Merced High-Speed Rail Station to align with local interests. Residents prefer subsidized access to high-speed rail and a station that delivers multiple community benefits in terms of employment opportunities, affordable

¹ The following statement was included with this question: City-level participatory budgeting is a democratic process where residents of a city directly decide how to allocate a portion of the public budget. It allows community members to propose, discuss, and vote on spending priorities, giving them a direct role in shaping local government investments and policies. The City of Merced will receive funding from the High-Speed Rail Authority for the purchase of lands to construct the railway and station.

housing, urban amenities, and environmental protections. To ensure sustained participatory engagement to implement the preferences highlighted in this report, community-based organizations should be incorporated at all stages of current HSR station planning as trusted messengers to encourage and elicit civic participation. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated strong support for civic engagement, from willingness to attend public meetings to community participation in Rail Station Design and in the budgeting process itself.

The survey confirmed that when approached through trusted, community-rooted channels, Merced residents are ready to engage in the planning process. A community benefits agreement between local residents and other stakeholders and the High-Speed Rail Authority can address the most prominent needs identified by survey respondents, including the construction and operation of community facilities that provide local services and amenities such as workforce training programs and shelter on days of extreme heat and air pollution. Such a center could also host multi-cultural arts and community events and provide childcare, bilingual outreach, and translation services. Station design could also incorporate plans to increase affordable housing and incentives for local small businesses.

For the High-Speed Rail Authority and affiliated stakeholders, this survey represents a pivotal opportunity. Continued investment in community outreach—utilizing trusted CBOs—will ensure that Merced County residents remain informed, involved, and positioned to benefit from the infrastructure being developed around them. Prioritizing the needs of the community through a transparent, accessible process will not only strengthen public trust but also enhance the long-term success of the project.

Appendix (Demographic Characteristics)

Table 16. What Race or Ethnicity do You Identify as? (Check All That Apply)

	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Census 2020</u>
Latino/a/x	62%	69%
White /European American	23%	16%
African American/Black	9%	5%
Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander	3%	3%
Other or elaborating on other identity (Please specify)	4%	3%
Native American/Indigenous	1%	<1%
Middle Eastern/Arab American	0%	N/A
n= 402		

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024, and the Census, 2020 Census Tracts 13.01, 13.02, 15.02, 16.01.

Table 17. What is Your Highest Level of Education Completed?

	<u>Percent</u>	<u>ACS 2023</u>
High school graduate	33%	24%
Some college	26%	20%
Some schooling, but no high school	12%	22%
Associate degree	10%	8%
Some high school	7%	15%
Bachelor's degree	6%	6%
Graduate degree or Professional school	5%	4%
No schooling	1%	N/A
n= 406		

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024, and the American Community Survey, 2023 Census Tracts 13.01, 13.02, 15.02, 16.01, ACST5Y 2023.

Table 18. Last Year, in 2023, What Was Your Entire Household’s Annual Income?

	<u>Percent</u>	<u>ACS 2023</u>
\$0-24,999	41%	32%
\$25,000-49,999	29%	27%
\$50,000-74,999	18%	23%
\$75,000-124,999	10%	N/A
\$125,000-174,999	2%	N/A
\$175,000 or higher	0%	N/A
n=391		

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024, and the American Community Survey, 2023 Census Tracts 13.01, 13.02, 15.02, 16.01, ACST5Y 2023.

Table 19. Is This Address Owned or Rented by the Residents?

	<u>Percent</u>	<u>ACS 2023</u>
Rented	68%	80%
Owned	32%	20%
Not sure	<1%	N/A
n= 406		

Source: UC Merced Community and Labor Center analysis of the Merced High-Speed Rail Survey, 2024, and the American Community Survey, 2023 Census Tracts 13.01, 13.02, 15.02, 16.01, ACST5Y 2023.

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MISSION STATEMENT

The UC Merced Community and Labor Center conducts research and education on issues of community, labor and the environment, in the San Joaquin Valley and beyond.