

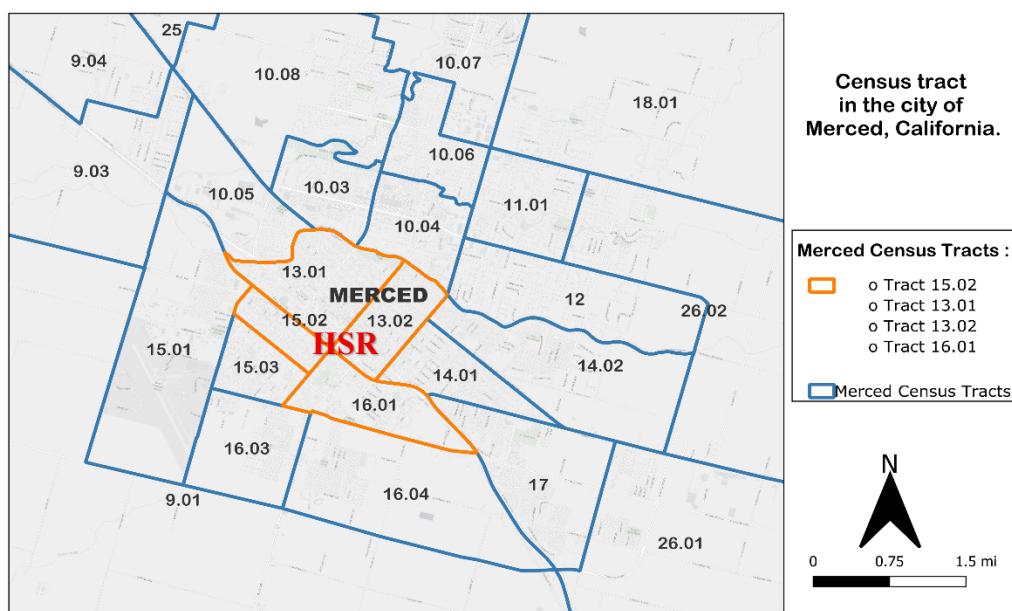
High-Speed Rail, Community Preferences, and Public Participation in Merced Station Development

UC Merced Community and Labor Center

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 HSR if subsidized
- Preferences for Job Creation and Less Pollution
- Preferences for local economic development and cultural amenities
- Strong support for community participation in the design of the Merced HSR station and the budgeting process
- Community Benefits Agreements should focus on Job Creation and Affordable Housing

Figure 1 Survey Census Tracts Intercepted by the High-Speed Rail (HSR) Station



INTRODUCTION

The state has allocated over \$13 billion dollars 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.¹

The high-speed rail project is at a pivotal moment with the commencement of station design for four Central Valley based stations: Merced, Fresno, Kings/Tulare, and Bakersfield. 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.”² Moreover, 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.”³

The station design component of the high-speed rail project provides a critical opportunity to transform hub regions while advancing economic, environmental, and public health benefits in the four communities that will host these first stations. To meet the state’s transformative objectives for station development, 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 community needs of residents from the High-Speed Rail (HSR) hub city of Merced, the site of the Merced station near the downtown area. 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 outreach 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

¹ Burman, Theo. 2025. “California High-Speed Rail Shares Update on ‘Momentous Achievements.’” New Week. <https://www.newsweek.com/california-high-speed-rail-update-achievement-2084969>

² <https://hsr.ca.gov/2022/10/20/news-release-california-high-speed-rail-board-awards-design-contract-for-central-valley-stations/>

³ <https://law.justia.com/codes/california/code-hsc/division-26/part-2/chapter-4-1/section-39712/>

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 receives an automatic annual appropriation of 25 percent of the state's Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) which equals about \$1 billion annually. 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.

A. 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 identify additional outreach needs and strategies for promoting local use of the station and railway with local community organizations.

Table 1. Which of the following responses best describes your awareness of the development of the High-Speed Rail Station in Merced/Hanford?

Awareness of the High-Speed Rail Station (n= 406)	
I am fully aware of the project.	23.9% (97)
I am somewhat aware of the project	44.6% (181)
I am not aware of the project	31.5% (128)

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. So even though majorities have heard of the project, most do not know the full details, showing a need for more community outreach.

Table 2. Do you plan on using the high-speed rail once it becomes operational?

Response (n=405)	
Definitely	37.5 % (152)
Probably	31.9 % (129)
Not sure	20.3 % (82)
Probably not	4.7 % (19)
Definitely not	5.7 % (23)

Table 3. How likely would you use the High-Speed Rail if there were a discounted rate for local residents?

Likeliness to Use the High-Speed Rail (n=407)	Percentage (Frequency)
Very likely	52.6% (214)
Likely	28.8% (117)
Somewhat likely	13.5% (55)
Not likely	5.2% (21)

Tables 2 and 3 show that there is substantial interest by disinvested communities 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 local residents to use the high-speed rail. 29% of respondents indicated that they would likely use the train if subsidized, while 13.5% were somewhat likely to do so. Only 5% of local residents 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, expand access to local labor markets and economic opportunities, increased public access to transportation services has 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 fare policies that help ensure locals actually benefit from the project.

Table 4. How do you plan on using the high-speed rail? (Check all that apply).

Response	
Visiting family or friends	61.82%
Traveling for leisure	56.2 %
Attending events or activities	38.4%
Connecting to other forms of public transit	33.7%
Commuting to work or school	25.4 %
Business travel	18.7%
Other	3.45%

B. 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.

Table 5. Which of the following concerns do you have about the Merced High-Speed Rail Station project? (Check all that apply)

Concern	
Rising Housing/Rental Cost Concerns	48.2% (196)
Cost and Funding Concerns	47.7% (194)
Environmental Impact	41.0% (167)

Noise Pollution Concerns	30.5% (124)
Traffic Congestion Concerns	29.2% (119)
Negative economic impact on local businesses Concerns	19.2% (78)
No Concerns	17.7% (126)
Lowering Property Value	16.0% (65)

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 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.

C. 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.

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?

Option	Level of Importance	
Number of jobs created	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	64.9%(262) 28.5%(115) 4.7 %(19) 2.0 %(8) N=404

Quality of jobs created	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	70.05% (283) 24.26% (98) 4.70% (19) 1.0% (4) N=404
Safety of jobs created	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	66.8% (270) 26.7% (108) 4.7% (19) 1.7% (7) N=404
Accessibility of jobs to local residents	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	71.9% (289) 23.6% (95) 3.2% (13) 1.2% (5) N=402
Services or benefits the development provides to local residents	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	63.1% (255) 30.5% (123) 5.7% (23) 0.7% (3) N=404
The amount of local tax	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	52.6% (211) 33.2% (133) 9.0% (36) 5.2% (21) N=401
Environmental benefits	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	58.21%(234) 30.6%(123) 8.96%(36) 2.24%(9) N=402
The development does not increase air pollution	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	57.8% (233) 30.5% (123) 8.7% (35) 3.0% (12) N=403
The development does not increase water pollution	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	67.1% (269) 25.2% (101) 5.0% (20) 2.7% (11) N=401
The development does not increase local traffic and congestion	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	55.5%(221) 28.9%(115) 11.1%(44) 4.5%(18) N=398
The development does not increase local safety risks such as fires, leaks, or explosions	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	64.9% (262) 26.0% (105) 5.7% (23) 3.5% (14)

		N=404
The development does not increase greenhouse gas emissions	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	57.7% (232) 28.6% (115) 9.2% (37) 4.5% (18) N=402
The development does not emit odors	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	54.7% (220) 30.6% (123) 10.5% (42) 4.2% (17) N=402
The development does not create noise pollution	Very important Important Somewhat important Not at all important	52.9% (212) 31.9% (128) 10.2% (41) 5.0% (20) N=401

When asked to weigh different factors that may influence their support for potential new developments (such as High-Speed Rail) in their locality in Table 6, Merced residents placed great value on the economic benefits of such projects, followed closely by environmental impacts. 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.⁴

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. This is because according to the percentages, respondents prioritized other benefits, such as the services the projects brings to the community, over some significant environmental concerns like air

⁴ Flores, Edward. Inequality at the Heart of California. Policy Report. October 2019. Merced, CA: Civic Capacity Research Initiative.

pollution and odor. Other environmental concerns like traffic congestion, noise pollution, and increasing greenhouse gas emission were also concerning to respondents but were ranked lower compared to the 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 7. What kind of development would you like to see around the Merced High-Speed Rail Station? (Check all that apply)

Development	Merced (n=407)
Retail stores	78.1% (318)
Restaurants	77.9% (317)
Affordable residential housing	73.0% (297)
Healthcare facilities	72.0% (293)
Office spaces	71.3% (290)
Community center/event center	69.0% (281)
Job training center	68.3% (278)
Parks and green spaces	56.3% (229)
Welcome center, art, cultural center, galleries (culturally relevant)	47.2% (192)
Meeting spaces	43.5% (177)
EV charging stations	42.0% (171)
Other	6.4% (26)

Table 7 for Merced shows that a large portion of respondents are interested in new potential developments to accompany High Speed Rail; over 75% of residents voice interest in commercial and retail offerings, 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 call for community (69.0%) and job training centers (68.3%), and over half support the development of local parks and green spaces (56.3%).

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?

Options	Level of Importance Percentage (Frequency)	
	Merced	
Pedestrian walking paths to High-Speed	Very important	64.4% (261)

Rail Station	Important Somewhat Important Not at all important	26.4% (107) 6.2% (25) 3.0% (12) N = 405
Bicycle paths to High-Speed Rail Station	Very important Important Somewhat Important Not at all important	59.4% (241) 30.8% (125) 7.1% (29) 2.7% (11) N = 405
Frequent low-cost public bus service to High-Speed Rail Station	Very important Important Somewhat Important Not at all important	64.7% (262) 28.9% (117) 5.2% (21) 1.2% (5) N = 405
Community ride-share program	Very important Important Somewhat Important Not at all important	54.6% (218) 33.3% (133) 10.3% (41) 1.8% (7) N = 399

Table 8 reflects establishing good and reliable commuting options between the high-speed rail station and neighborhoods in Merced is crucial to ensuring that city residents access and use the new railway more. 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 and local planners investments in pedestrian walkways, bicycle paths, reliable low-cost public bus services, and community rideshare programs to link communities to the railway station. 64.6% preferred that authorities prioritize investments in pedestrian walkways and frequent, low-cost public bus services connecting neighborhoods to the high-speed rail. Bicycle paths and community rideshare programs were ranked 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 also highlights other infrastructure and public service developments that residents would like to see alongside as retail stores, parks, restaurants and others projects outlined in Table 8 above. 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.

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).

High-speed Rail Benefits Options	Merced (n=407)
Increase employment opportunities for good jobs with benefits for local residents	82.31% (335)
Improved connectivity to regional airports	72.24% (294)
Increased tourism and local business activity	67.08% (273)
Reduced travel times to major cities	64.62% (263)

Enhanced transportation options for residents	59.95%(244)
Environmental benefits (e.g., reduced carbon emissions)	55.04% (224)
Other (please specify)	3.19% (13)

Having an enhanced understanding of what Merced city residents expect from the high-speed rail project is valuable in guiding local administrators and high-speed rail authority policies as they work on implementation. As shown in the Table 9 above, the first major benefit of the high-speed rail is employment oriented. 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, these preferences highlight one of the key challenges residents in Merced face—unemployment. Addressing this concern through the high-speed rail project could significantly impact the local economy and improve overall community well-being.

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).

Option	Merced (n=405)
Job creation	90.39%(367)
Affordable housing	86.45%(351)
Healthcare services	80.05%(325)
Local business support	79.8%(324)
Educational programs	78.33%(318)
Environmental protections	75.86%(308)
Community facilities	73.4%(298)
Small business support	58.62%(238)
Other	2.96%(12)

Given that Community Benefit Agreement (CBA) can help consolidate the link between community attitudes and community engagements in new projects, gathering public opinions on the kind of benefits communities would like to see included in CBA is pivotal to not only establishing effective collective benefits agreements but also crucial in garnering community trust and acceptance of the projects. For Table 10, job creation was the most desired aspect for a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA), selected by 90.39% (367) of respondents. Affordable housing ranked second, chosen by 86.45% (351) participants. Healthcare services (80.05%) and local business support (79.8%) were also highly valued by the community. Additionally, educational programs (78.33%) and environmental protections (75.86%) highlighted significant concern for sustainable development and educational opportunities. Among the less popular aspects, community facilities (73.4%) were considered important but not prioritized as highly as other categories. Small business support (58.62%) was seen as less impactful compared to general business support. Lastly, other aspects (2.96%) were specified by only 12 respondents, indicating a low demand for additional themes.

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?

Option	Response	Percent (Frequency)
Job creation	Very important Important Somewhat Important Not at all important	68.07% (275) 24.50% (99) 5.94% (24) 1.49% (6) N=404
Job training	Very important Important Somewhat Important Not at all important	61.39% (248) 28.71% (116) 8.42% (34) 1.49% (6) N=404
Flood control	Very important Important Somewhat Important Not at all important	57.00% (228) 28.75% (115) 11.25% (45) 3.00% (12) N=400
Protections from extreme heat	Very important Important Somewhat Important Not at all important	61.25% (245) 29.00% (116) 8.25% (33) 1.50% (6) N=400
Reducing air pollution	Very important Important Somewhat Important Not at all important	64.00% (256) 28.75% (115) 5.50% (22) 1.75% (7) N=400
Creating more parks and recreational space	Very important Important Somewhat Important Not at all important	55.47% (223) 34.33% (138) 7.96% (32) 2.24% (9) N=402
Increasing access to clean drinking water	Very important Important Somewhat Important Not at all important	72.98% (289) 22.22% (88) 4.04% (16) 0.76% (3) N=396

High-Speed Rail Development	Very important Important Somewhat Important Not at all important	50.25% (199) 34.34% (136) 10.61% (42) 4.80% (19) N=396
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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 is mandated to benefit individuals living in disadvantaged census tracts. Merced County would benefit from increased climate investment due to current low investment rates and the high vulnerability of its population. Between 2015 and the end of 2021, the state allocated GGRF funds in Merced County. 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 a special opportunity for the High-Speed Rail Authority to tie GGRF investments to benefits prioritized by residents in the impacted community in a way that generates greater enthusiasm and support for the mega-project.

D. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN HIGH-SPEED RAIL

Table 12. Would you be willing to come to a meeting about the benefits of having a High-Speed Rail station?

Willingness to Attend Meeting	Percentage (Frequency)
Yes	49.75% (202)
Maybe	33.00% (134)
No	17.24% (70)

N=406

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 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. This results in this table indicate the strong willingness among Merced city 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 the Rail Station Development.

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?

Want Extensive Community Participation and Representation	Percentage (Frequency)
Yes	90.91% (370)
No	9.09% (37)

N = 407

Given that many Merced city 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 makes it clear 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, overwhelmingly respond affirmatively (with 91% stating “Yes”).

Table 14. 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. Would you like to see the City of Merced implement participatory community budgeting for the use of the High Speed Rail funds?

Participatory Community Budgeting Response	Percentage (Frequency)
Yes	93.07% (376)
No	6.93% (28)

Table 14 queried the community about interest in community-based 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 mandate to enact a democratic and community-based budgeting model for the investments in high-speed rail station design and construction.

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).

Option	Percent (Frequency)
Work schedule conflicts or lack of time off from work	45.3%(184)
Limited access to information about the meeting	43.8%(178)
Lack of trust in the process or belief that my input will not be valued	33.7%(137)
Childcare responsibilities or lack of affordable childcare	27.1%(110)
Concerns about the meeting being conducted in a language that is not understood	23.7%(96)
Health or mobility issues	23.4%(95)
Lack of affordable transportation to the meeting location	23.2%(94)
Other (please specify)	4.4%(18)

N=388

Merced residents express a clear interest in community engagement; however, as shown in Table 15 above, 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.

E. CONCLUSION-FINAL 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 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. On several dimensions, there was strong support for civic engagement, from

willingness to attend public meetings to overwhelming interest in 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.

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F. APPENDIX (DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS)

Table 16. What race or ethnicity do you identify as? (Check all that apply).

Option	Percent (Frequency) Merced Sample	US Census 2020
African American/Black	8.62%(35)	5.22%
Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander	3.2%(13)	3.07%
Latino/a/x	61.58%(250)	69.09%
Native American/Indigenous	1.48%(6)	0.46%
White /European American	23.15%(94)	16.38%
Middle Eastern/Arab American	0%(0)	Not registered
Other or elaborating on other identity (Please specify)	4.19%(17)	2.89% (includes 2 races or more)

N=402

*Merced's Census Tracts: 13.01, 13.02, 15.02 and 16.01

Table 17. What is your highest level of education completed?

Levels of Education Completed	Percentage (Frequency) Merced Sample	ACS Percent for 4 Census Tracts According to ACST5Y 2023 for population above 25 years
No schooling	0.74 %(3)	Not registered
Some schooling, but no high school	11.58% (47)	21.98%
Some high school	7.39% (30)	15.46%
High school graduate	33.25% (135)	24.08%
Some college	25.86 %(105)	20.40%
Associate degree	9.85% (40)	8.17%
Bachelor's degree	6.40% (26)	5.67%
Graduate degree or Professional school	4.93% (20)	4.24%

N = 406

*Merced's Census Tracts: 13.01, 13.02, 15.02 and 16.01

Table 18. Last year, in 2023, what was your entire household's annual income? Whatever you answer will be kept confidential. (Let respondent mark on the tablet).

Annual income in 2023	Percentage (Frequency)	ACS Average of Percent of 4 Census Tracts According to ACST5Y 2023*
	Merced Sample	
\$0-24,999	40.66% (159)	31.53%
\$25,000-49,999	28.90% (113)	27.45%
\$50,000-74,999	17.65% (69)	22.75%
\$75,000-124,999	10.23% (40)	Not registered (only 75,000- 149,999=12.13%)
\$125,000-174,999	2.30% (9)	Not registered (only 150,000- 199,999=3.68%)
\$175,000 or higher	0.26% (1)	Not registered (only 200,000 or higher=2.48%)

N = 391

*Merced's Census Tracts: 13.01, 13.02, 15.02 and 16.01

Table 19. Is this address owned or rented by the residents?

Address Status	Percentage (Frequency)	ACS Average Percent of 4 Census Tracts According to ACDP5Y 2023*
	Merced Sample	
Owned	31.53% (128)	20.04%
Rented	67.98% (276)	79.96%
Not sure	0.49% (2)	Not registered

N = 406

*Merced's Census Tracts: 13.01, 13.02, 15.02 and 16.01