



Fairmead:
Waiting for a Train
Madera County Grand Jury
2023-2024
Final Report 2324-04
June 19, 2024

Summary

The Madera County Grand Jury (MCGJ) investigated several issues which currently plague the residents of Fairmead, a small unincorporated community located in Madera County, between the cities of Madera and Chowchilla. Due to its proximity, Fairmead falls within Chowchilla's sphere of influence. Unpaved streets, water quantity and quality, flood control, and the lack of a sewer system top the list of community needs. Non-profit organizations have attempted to gain public assistance to mitigate these problems with little success.

Background

Fairmead, known for the Mammoth Orange, is a small unincorporated community with approximately 170 homes and 1200 residents. Historically, San Joaquin Valley communities like Fairmead developed along the railroad tracks. Fairmead was originally a train stop with a few homes and businesses. Fairmead is a planned community designed in 1912 by developers from Palo Alto, CA. Later, Fairmead became a farm worker community, and is currently lacking modernized infrastructure.

Recent public information regarding the High Speed Rail as well as a press release detailing the plight of Fairmead residents with the lack of essential services prompted the MCGJ to investigate Fairmead and their issues. The High Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) plans to pass through Fairmead, and has offered the community many promises to upgrade their infrastructure.

Methodology

- Interviewed Madera County and Chowchilla City representatives.
- Interviewed key community members
- Toured the community of Fairmead
- Reviewed proposed HSRA route maps and WYE alignments
- Reviewed City of Chowchilla proposed sewer line to Fairmead map
- Reviewed Leadership Counsel for Justice & Accountability press release

[Community of Fairmead in Madera County Secures Investments as High Speed Rail Seeks to Pass Through - Leadership Counsel for Justice & Accountability](#)

- Reviewed Agreement between the HSRA and the Friends of Fairmead
- Reviewed the Madera County – 2012 Fairmead Colony Plan.
<https://fairmead.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Fairmead-Colony-Area-Plan-Alternative-C-Revised-February-2012.pdf#:~:text=for%20low%20income%20groups%20and%20children%20who.areas%2C%20and%20other%20important%20community%20focal%20points>.

- Reviewed the 2015 The Nation article entitled “[Welcome to Fairmead, California, Where You Have to Walk a Mile for a Sip of Water | The Nation](#)”

Abbreviations

- FCF- Fairmead Community and Friends
- HSRA-High Speed Rail Authority
- MCGJ - Madera County Grand Jury
- MOU – Memorandum of Agreement
- SWRCB - State Water Resources Control Board

Discussion

Efforts to improve the living conditions in Fairmead have been difficult and met with promises without timelines for beginning or completion of projects.

Water Issues:

Some homes are hooked up to a community water system, known as the Sally Lovelady Water Works Facility, provided by Madera County. Others continue to use individual residential wells, some of which have gone dry. Homes with producing wells cannot use those wells because the water is high in agricultural chemicals making the water unfit for human consumption. Claiming economic hardship or personal choice, some families have elected not to connect to the community water system.

Further evidence of the need for water was the recognized efforts of Madera County Farm Bureau, a private organization, who delivered bottled water to the residents for several months. The bottled water was intended for drinking and/or cooking. Additional water is needed to wash clothes, water plants, and to provide water to animals.

Sewer Issues:

Fairmead lacks a community sewer system. Each home uses individual septic tanks and leach lines. Many of these systems have original pipes that are often plugged or collapsed, preventing the septic systems from functioning adequately.

The City of Chowchilla submitted a grant proposal to the state of California to upgrade Chowchilla’s sewer system for anticipated growth and provides a provision for Fairmead to access the system. The grant provides for the installation of a 24-inch pipeline to reach the outskirts of Fairmead, allowing Fairmead to become part of the Chowchilla sewer system. Should Fairmead receive the anticipated \$7 million from the High-Speed Rail Authority (HSRA), those funds would pay to complete the sewer infrastructure in Fairmead and connect all the houses to the proposed new sewer system. As of January 2024, the city of Chowchilla has received preliminary state approval of this grant request.

In February 2024, Chowchilla personnel reported an update to the Chowchilla City Council regarding the Fairmead Sewer Consolidation Project. Chowchilla City personnel reported that the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) had completed the technical

and financial package reviews and have sent documentation to SWRCB management for review. Following management review, City personnel anticipated the Funding Agreement would be provided to the City by July 2024.

Roads:

According to the Madera County Planning Department in their 2012 Fairmead Colony Area Plan:

The existing street system of Fairmead consists of a combination of abandoned right of way, poorly maintained paved roads, and unimproved (unpaved) roads. Many of the roads within the planning area were designed and built in the beginning of the 20th century and have since lacked proper maintenance. Portions of the existing system contain relic curbs, gutters, and sidewalks from the initial development of the community. These relics, however, are now in a state of disrepair due to the long-term degradation from lack of maintenance.

In late 2023, the MCGJ toured Fairmead and noted that the roads are still in a state of disrepair. Many roads continue to be unpaved and riddled with potholes. Rain runoff creates traffic hazards on unpaved roads with mud bogs.

Madera County has failed to maintain the Fairmead roads. The damaged roads have caused the Chowchilla Elementary School District, which picks up and drops off students to the school in Fairmead, to make changes to their school bus routes.

Measure T, which is intended to provide additional funds for roads and transportation needs, has not provided any money to Fairmead. Measure T is an extra one-half cent tax added to local retail sales tax, and has collected \$219 million since it took effect in 2006. Measure T is set to sunset in 2027. The Measure T Oversight Committee only included one Fairmead road in their 2023 inspection tour.

High Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) Promises:

Efforts to call attention to the needs of the Fairmead community have been spearheaded by Fairmead Community and Friends (FCF), a non-profit organization, with assistance from the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, and Self-Help Enterprises.

According to an FCF press release, after nearly five years of negotiations with the HSRA, the FCF was able to reach a mitigated agreement with the HSRA in 2021. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) committed the HSRA to cooperate with FCF on the funding and construction-specific infrastructure improvements within Fairmead.

Provisions of the agreement include:

- The HSRA will provide funding for a community center/library with Madera County providing the design, construction, operation and maintenance of the facility.
- The HSRA will provide financial assistance to Fairmead's community water system with Madera County.

- The HSRA will provide funding to connect sewer service from Chowchilla to Fairmead and pay for the first ten years of the residents' sewer service.
- The HSRA will complete several road replacements, sidewalk installations, street lighting, and landscape projects throughout Fairmead.
- The HSRA will assist the Fairmead Community and Friends and Madera County in seeking funding for the development of affordable housing in Fairmead.

HSRA Uncertainties:

Several uncertainties surrounding the impact of the HSRA on the community remain. The MOU is a non-binding agreement and therefore cannot be enforced. Despite the MOU's stipulations, no definite timeline was established as a part of the agreement. All the HSRA contributions towards Fairmead could potentially be voided if the route bypasses Fairmead. After many attempts, the MCGJ has been unable to contact HSRA representatives or obtain any information regarding the exact route that the HSRA will take, and its development through Fairmead. The MCGJ examined HSRA maps of the various proposed routes. These maps fail to show any detail as to which Fairmead properties will be purchased and/or demolished for the HSRA route. When the HSRA train route is selected, the affected properties will undergo surveys followed by land purchase price negotiations. The legal procedures may take years. This ultimately means that any improvements to Fairmead may be very far in the future.

Findings:

F1. The MCGJ finds Fairmead is in dire need of assistance to mitigate the water challenges.

F2. The MCGJ finds Fairmead is in dire need of assistance to mitigate the sewer challenges.

F3. The MCGJ finds Fairmead is in dire need of assistance to mitigate the road challenges.

F4. The MCGJ finds that the HSRA has entered into a MOU agreement with the FCF that fails to include any timelines or deadlines for performance.

F5. The MCGJ finds that it is uncertain how the HSRA route will impact Fairmead.

Recommendations

R1. The MCGJ recommends that the Board of Supervisors create a work group with the HSRA and FCF to establish timelines, monitor the progress, and report to the Board of Supervisor annually regarding the water system conditions by October 1, 2024.

R2. The MCGJ recommends that the Board of Supervisors create a work group with the City of Chowchilla, FCF, and HSRA to establish timelines, monitor progress, and report to the Board of Supervisors annually regarding the implementation of the sewer system by October 1, 2024.

R3. The MCGJ recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct the County of Madera Road Department to submit a plan to the Board of Supervisors addressing the road repairs, including a timeline for completion, by October 1, 2024.

R4. The MCGJ recommends that the Madera County Board of Supervisors, the HSRA, and FCF establish timelines and deadlines for each provision included in the MOU agreement by October 1, 2024.

R5. The MCGJ recommends that Madera County, FCF, and HSRA determine the exact Fairmead HSRA route and determine the affected properties by October 1, 2024.

Required Responses:

Pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the MCGJ requests responses as follows;
From the following elected county officials within 90 days:

Madera County Board of Supervisors
400 W. 4th Street
Madera, CA 93637

City of Chowchilla City Council
130 S. Second St.
Chowchilla, CA 93610

Invited Responses:

Pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the MCGJ requests responses as follows;
From the following elected county officials within 60 days:

Fairmead Community & Friends
P.O. Box 517
Chowchilla, CA 93610

City of Chowchilla Public Works
360 N 1st St.
Chowchilla, CA 93610

Madera County Public Works
200 W. 4th St.
Madera, CA 93637

High-Speed Rail Authority
Central California Regional Office
1111 H Street
Fresno, CA 93721

Note: This report was prepared using current information available on the websites listed.

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury. The California State Legislature has stated that it intends the provisions of Penal Code Section 929 prohibiting disclosure of witness identities to encourage full candor in testimony in Grand Jury investigations by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those who participate in any Civil Grand Jury investigation.
