

CALIFORNIA COURT OF APPEAL, FIRST APPELLATE DISTRICT, DIVISION ONE

Mendocino Railway v. Meyer

Mendocino Railway · No. A168497, A168959 · Decided January 7, 2026

SUMMARY

The California Court of Appeal reviews an eminent domain action in which Mendocino Railway sought to acquire a 20-acre parcel owned by John Meyer for railroad facilities. The trial court held that Mendocino Railway was not a public utility with eminent-domain authority and, alternatively, had not satisfied the statutory requirements for a public use. The Court of Appeal concluded that the trial court erred in interpreting the applicable law and applying the facts, and reversed.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	California Court of Appeal, First Appellate District, Division One
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Humes, P. J.; Langhorne Wilson, J.; Smiley, J.
JURISDICTION	California Court of Appeal, First Appellate District, Division One
DECIDED	January 7, 2026
DOCKET	A168497, A168959
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Mendocino Railway appealed after a bench-trial judgment rejecting its claim that it was a public utility authorized to exercise eminent domain and, alternatively, finding that it had not satisfied the statutory requirements for the proposed taking.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Questions of law and predominantly legal mixed questions of law and fact are reviewed independently; historical or physical factual findings are reviewed for substantial evidence. Whether the facts legally establish satisfaction of eminent-domain requirements is reviewed de novo. The condemnor bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence that it is a common-carrier public utility and that the statutory requirements for eminent domain are satisfied.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published California Court of Appeal opinion; precedential after certification for publication on January 7, 2026.
PARTIES	Mendocino Railway v. John Meyer

TOPICS

real estate

takings clause

statutory interpretation

standard of review

appellate procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

eminent domain

real estate

public utilities

appellate law

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Mendocino Railway established by a preponderance of the evidence that it was a common-carrier public utility entitled to exercise eminent domain.
2. Whether services provided directly or indirectly through affiliated entities can support public-utility status under California law.
3. Whether the proposed acquisition satisfied the statutory requirements that the public interest and necessity require the project, that the project be planned and located compatibly with the greatest public good and least private injury, and that the property be necessary for the project.
4. Whether incidental private benefits or the fact that excursion services generated most of Mendocino Railway's revenue defeated the public-use requirement.

HOLDINGS

1. Mendocino Railway proved by a preponderance of the evidence that it was a common-carrier public utility entitled to exercise eminent domain.
2. The proposed acquisition of the property for construction and maintenance of railroad-related facilities was a public use under California's eminent-domain statutes.
3. Mendocino Railway established by a preponderance of the evidence that the project was planned and located compatibly with the greatest public good and least private injury and that Meyer's property was necessary for the project.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"The test . . . is whether the public has a legal right to the use, which cannot be gainsaid, or denied, or withdrawn at the pleasure of the owner." (17)

"The essential feature of a public use is that it is not confined to privileged individuals, but is open to the indefinite public." (18-19)

"Rather, what is required is a showing of the public's unconditional right to use the CWR." (20)

"It is the character of the use, not its extent, which determines whether it is public." (25)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Mendocino Railway owns and operates the California Western Railroad line between Fort Bragg and Willits and provides, directly or through affiliated entities, passenger and freight services in addition to excursion services. It sought to acquire Meyer's approximately 20-acre undeveloped parcel near Willits for maintenance and repair

facilities, storage and yard space, transloading facilities, and a passenger depot. The trial court found that Mendocino Railway was not a public utility and had not shown that the proposed acquisition served a public use, was properly located, or was necessary, but the Court of Appeal concluded that the record and governing law supported each required element.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Mendocino Railway filed an eminent-domain action in Mendocino County Superior Court to acquire a 20-acre parcel owned by John Meyer for railroad-related facilities. After a multi-day bench trial, the superior court entered judgment for Meyer, awarded related attorney fees, and denied Mendocino Railway's requests to reopen the trial to introduce additional Railroad Retirement Board material. The Court of Appeal reversed the judgment and attorney-fee award and remanded for proceedings concerning compensation.

DISPOSITION

reversed_and_remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

Reverse the judgment in favor of Meyer and the related attorney-fees award. Remand for further proceedings regarding the amount of compensation to be paid to Meyer for the taking of his property.

CASES CITED

- City of Fremont v. Fisher, 160 Cal. App. 4th 666, 678 (2008)
- Crocker National Bank v. City and County of San Francisco, 49 Cal. 3d 881, 888 (1989)
- City of Perris v. Stamper, 1 Cal. 5th 576, 594 (2016)
- San Bernardino County Flood Control Dist. v. Grabowski, 205 Cal. App. 3d 885, 898 (1988)
- Masellis v. Law Office of Leslie F. Jensen, 50 Cal. App. 5th 1077, 1093 (2020)
- Robinson v. Superior Court, 88 Cal. App. 5th 1144, 1159, 1161 (2023)
- Lafayette Bollinger Development LLC v. Town of Moraga, 93 Cal. App. 5th 752, 776 (2023)
- City of Oakland v. Oakland Raiders, 32 Cal. 3d 60, 64 (1982)
- San Diego Metropolitan Transit Development Board v. Price Co., 37 Cal. App. 4th 1541, 1545 (1995)
- Richfield Oil Corp. v. Public Utilities Commission, 54 Cal. 2d 419, 430-431 (1960)
- Unocal California Pipeline Co. v. Conway, 23 Cal. App. 4th 331, 333-335 (1994)
- Story v. Richardson, 186 Cal. 162, 167 (1921)
- Commercial Communications, Inc. v. Public Utilities Commission, 50 Cal. 2d 512, 523 (1958)
- Doe v. Regents of California, 28 Cal. App. 5th 44, 57 (2018)
- City of St. Helena v. Public Utilities Commission, 119 Cal. App. 4th 793, 802-803 (2004)
- Gomez v. Superior Court, 35 Cal. 4th 1125, 1140 (2005)
- Van Hoosear v. Railroad Commission of California, 184 Cal. 553, 554-555 (1920)
- Traber v. Railroad Commission of California, 183 Cal. 304, 307-308 (1920)

- Palermo Land & Water Co. v. Railroad Commission of California, 173 Cal. 380, 384 (1916)
- People ex rel. Department of Public Works v. Superior Court of Merced County, 68 Cal. 2d 206, 210 (1968)
- Los Angeles County v. Anthony, 224 Cal. App. 2d 103, 105, 107 (1964)
- People ex rel. Department of Public Works v. Garden Grove Farms, 231 Cal. App. 2d 666, 671 (1965)
- Laguna Drainage District v. Charles Martin Co., 144 Cal. 209, 217-218 (1904)
- People ex rel. Department of Public Works v. Lagiss, 223 Cal. App. 2d 23, 38 (1963)
- San Joaquin & Kings River Canal & Irrigation Co. v. Stevenson, 164 Cal. 221, 229 (1912)
- Lorenz v. Jacob, 63 Cal. 73, 74 (1883)
- County of San Mateo v. Coburn, 130 Cal. 631, 634 (1900)
- San Francisco v. Ross, 44 Cal. 2d 52, 59 (1955)
- Redevelopment Agency v. Rados Bros., 95 Cal. App. 4th 309, 315 (2001)
- Stratford Irrigation District v. Empire Water Co., 58 Cal. App. 2d 616, 621-622 (1943)
- SFPP v. Burlington Northern & Santa Fe Railway Co., 121 Cal. App. 4th 452, 470-471 (2004)
- San Diego Gas & Electric Co. v. Lux Land Co., 194 Cal. App. 2d 472, 477-478 (1961)
- Hittle v. Santa Barbara County Employees Retirement Association, 39 Cal. 3d 374, 396 (1985)
- Washington Mutual Bank v. Blechman, 157 Cal. App. 4th 662, 670 (2007)
- R.D. v. P.M., 202 Cal. App. 4th 181, 188 (2011)
- DVD Copy Control Association, Inc. v. Bunner, 31 Cal. 4th 864, 890 (2003)
- Smith v. Selma Community Hospital, 164 Cal. App. 4th 1478, 1515 (2008)
- Pasadena v. Stimson, 91 Cal. 238, 254-256 (1891)
- City of Hawthorne v. Peebles, 166 Cal. App. 2d 758, 763 (1959)