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Local officials visit Austin to support high speed rail

By Sandra Cason, News Messenger

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It will be a week or two before results are known, but local officials left an Austin committee hearing on Tuesday with a spirit of optimism.

In their capacity as representatives of the East Texas Corridor Council, Harrison County Judge Richard Anderson and J.G. "Griff" Hubbard, product line revenue agent for Amtrak, testified before the Transportation Committee regarding high speed rail service for the area.

Hubbard serves as the council's executive director and Anderson is a member of its Legislative Affairs Committee.

The two made the early morning visit to the state Capitol to speak in favor of House Bill 646, authored by District 5 State Representative Bryan Hughes (R-Mineola) and filed earlier this legislative session.

In the 1980s, Congress approved the South High Speed Rail Commission to allow Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama to work together as a region, Hughes' Chief of Staff Daniel Deslatte said.

The bill's purpose is to give Texas the option of joining with these other states in planning for high speed rail travel.

"I thought the hearing went very well," Hughes said. "The Transportation Committee is familiar with high speed rail and the need for it. Judge Anderson did an excellent job of addressing the group and I think the committee was impressed with his testimony."

Hughes said it is standard policy to hold a bill "for at least a week or two to give committee members time to work out the details."

Hughes said the bill will then go to the Committee on Calendars for scheduling before the House and Senate. "The system is designed more to kill a bill than to get it passed," he added. "It will be my job to see that it clears all the hurdles and land mines."

"Although you don't ever take anything for granted, my feeling is that it is a go. I'm optimistic that we will get it passed," Hughes said.

Anderson said the matter now before the Texas Legislature had its origins about two years ago with the East Texas Corridor Council.

The group "passed a resolution requesting that there be a link established between Marshall and Shreveport/Bossier City which will, in effect, join the South Central and South high speed rail corridors, which in turn, will connect Texas rail with the Ohio Valley and East Corridor route," Anderson said.

"It's all part of a strategy to bring Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas together to advance federal funding for the project," Anderson added.

"We find ourselves at a very opportune time since the federal government, for the first time, is offering to pay 80 cents per dollar — with a 20-cent state match — for railroad funding. This has historically been the case for highways but it has just now started for high speed rail.

"Adding to that, the stimulus package gives additional momentum to the project."

Anderson pointed out that "no one appeared in opposition" to the bill during the committee hearing. "All in all, it was a good day for East Texas," he added.

"I enjoyed seeing Representative Hughes and State Representative Tommy Merritt of Longview working together and moving ahead with a regional approach to solving transportation problems in East Texas.

"This is the first step Texas needs to take to bring these states together. We'll continue the journey," Anderson said.

Hubbard called it "a very successful hearing. The judge hit a home run with his testimony," he added, calling it "a significant event.

"Marshall and Harrison County will have a real opportunity to become the focal point that ties all this in together," Hubbard said.

Statistics reported earlier this year are that 7,406 passengers caught the Texas Eagle at the former Texas & Pacific Railway station during Amtrak's fiscal year from Oct. 1, 2007, to Sept. 30, 2008. That translated to an average of 21 daily travelers.

When compared to figures for the previous fiscal year, the Amtrak station at Marshall Depot showed a 35.4 percent increase in ridership for 2008.

A recent report by The Associated Press notes that, nationwide, "Amtrak has posted six years of ridership and revenue growth, due in part to high gasoline and airline prices. The railroad carried a record 28.7 million people last year."

The article, datelined Washington, quotes Vice President Joe Biden regarding funds included for passenger rail improvements in the economic stimulus package.

The sum of \$1.3 billion "will go toward long-overdue infrastructure upgrades and expanded passenger rail capacity," The AP said.

Of the total, \$105 million is earmarked to finance replacement of a 102-year-old Connecticut bridge, which is a part of the Northeast Corridor.

Another \$82 million will be spent on rail car repair and replacement.

"Biden said money from the federal stimulus package will roughly double the size of Amtrak's capital investment program over two years," The AP said.

Amtrak chief executive Joseph Boardman is quoted as saying "the money will support about 8,000 jobs and will be put to use quickly."

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