

Advocates want rail service east to Shreveport/Bossier
Tourism dollars, saving on gas would be benefits of route, officials say

By [JIMMY ISAAC](#)

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Rail passengers can take a train from Longview to Little Rock, Chicago and San Antonio — but getting 60 miles east to Shreveport, well, they better not miss the bus.

Local rail advocates say East Texas needs passenger rail service to Shreveport/Bossier City. Casinos attract enough tourists that a Louisiana contractor provides charter bus service from Longview's Amtrak station to downtown Shreveport each day.

The East Texas Corridor Council wants to keep passengers on the railroad tracks. The group of elected officials, rail advocates and business leaders was formed in 2002 and works to secure funding for higher-speed rail service from Dallas to Louisiana and Arkansas border connections, according to Celia Boswell, corridor council chairwoman.

"This is an overwhelming thing that we're in to right now," Boswell said, "but it's kind of fun."

On Wednesday, the council's board of directors expressed interest in joining the Southern Rapid Rail Transit Commission, an agency that works with Congressional and Legislative leaders in Washington and member states Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama for the expansion of passenger rail services.

The commission wants to include Texas, and having the East Texas Corridor Council come on board is a step toward that goal, commission Executive Director Karen Parsons said.

More than 536,000 people live in Gregg and Harrison counties and Caddo and Bossier parishes, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2005 estimates. In three of the four counties, the residents are poorer than the state average.

"I think in an economy now where you have such high fuel costs and the economy's growing, our traffic infrastructure needs are becoming more crowded," said Tim Vaughn, chair-elect of the corridor council. "(Higher speed rail to Shreveport) takes care of that."

Amtrak statistics show that Longview's train station has among the highest ridership of passengers along the Texas Eagle route, from Chicago to San Antonio. A Bossier City limousine service transports passengers either by van or bus between Longview and Shreveport twice daily, and about five passengers a day use the service, according to the driver.

Corridor council member and longtime rail activist Natalie Rabicoff said passenger rail has been the dream of many elected officials along the I-20 corridor. Many Dallas/Fort Worth residents make the 180-mile or more trip to the casinos once a month or more, in some cases. Taking a train to the casinos, Gladewater's antique shops, Canton's First Monday Trades Days or other Ark-La-Tex attractions will either save money in passengers' pocketbooks or add a touch more tourism dollars to cities along the trail, including Longview, she said.

"If you play your cards right, with the way gasoline is going up in price... it's going to be a plus," Rabicoff said, "because, as a city, we have put millions into developing Lear Park for all of the tournaments to the point that all of the families who can't get in a car can take a train."

Just as important as tourism is connectivity — in other words, linking existing routes together to get passengers closer to their destinations, according to Griff Hubbard of the council's board of directors. The Meridian Speedway is a 60-mile-per-hour higher speed rail service from Shreveport to Meridian, Miss. Just having passenger rail service from Marshall to Shreveport could potentially connect rail passengers to destinations along the East Coast without having to trek through Chicago, he said.

The East Texas Corridor Council received a \$455,000 grant to study the logistics and cost of constructing higher speed rail lines along the Interstate 20 corridor. The grant is from the U.S. Department of Transportation through the Federal Railroad Administration to the Texas Department of Transportation, who will administer the grant for corridor council, Hubbard said.

"It would be awesome to be able to go on over and keep going to Georgia and Florida on the train," Rabicoff said. "That way, you don't have to go all the way to Chicago to take a southern route."

Amtrak shuttle an option

Jasmine Gersham was a passenger on Thursday's Amtrak shuttle to Shreveport.

After spending more than a day on an Amtrak train, she was glad to make the final hour of her trip in a van.

Gersham, 20, was leaving her Southfield, Mich., home to move in with her stepsister in Shreveport. She caught the Amtrak Texas Eagle Wednesday in Chicago. She stepped off the train, made phone calls and smoked a Black & Mild cigar.

"We've been on a train for 27 hours and got no reception," she said, "and I couldn't smoke."

Gersham won't have a vote, but she said she's against any plans to expand passenger rail service between Longview and Shreveport.

Amtrak offers to its customers shuttle service at \$15 or less to Shreveport and up to \$63 to Houston, Longview Station Manager Patrick Calton said.

About 15 to 20 passengers board the Houston shuttle each day, while an average of five passengers ride each of two daily trips to Shreveport.

"Even \$15 is cheaper than gasoline," Calton said.

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