



East Texas high speed rail push continues

By [MIKE ELSWICK](#)

Tuesday, March 17, 2009

State Rep. Tommy Merritt said Monday that this could be the year that East Texans pushing for improvements in regional passenger rail may see dollars committed to the effort.

"We've got people from the region now working together on these high speed rail issues," he said. He is hoping that efforts of officials such as those scheduled to appear before a Texas House Transportation Committee this morning pay off.

RELATED

- [COMMENT: Have you ridden Amtrak lately?](#)
- [PHOTOS: Check out photos of the trainer and riders at the Longview depot.](#)
- [PHOTOS: Check out photos of an Amtrak train ride.](#)
- [RELATED STORY: Passenger rails see better patronage, on-time rates](#)

Harrison County Judge Richard Anderson and Griff Hubbard, executive director of the East Texas Corridor Council, are slated to appear before a House committee to voice support for a bill introduced by state Rep. Bryan Hughes, R-Mineola, to allow Texas to join with three other states in pursuing high speed rail service.

"We'll be appearing on the request of Tim Vaughn, chairman of the corridor council, to provide testimony in support of a bill that would allow Texas to join the Southern High-Speed Rail Compact," Hubbard said. The group includes Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

Hughes said House Bill 646 would allow the states to study the feasibility of rapid rail passenger service between the four states. Merritt said he has backed efforts to advance improved rail passenger service for years.

"This is good news and could be huge for the East Texas border region," he said.

Merritt has introduced a separate bill seeking to create a high speed rail authority for both the Texas-Louisiana and Texas-Mexico border regions.

"This would be independent of TxDOT (Texas Department of Transportation) and would be a legal entity that could go to Washington to go after some of the \$8 billion in economic stimulus money earmarked by the Obama administration for high speed rail."

Merritt said passage of his House Bill 3650 would provide needed funding to the East Texas effort to make higher speed rail a reality. He said highways continue to be the state's transportation entity's top priority in both funding and staffing.



[See the full-size video](#)

MORE AT NEWS-JOURNAL.COM

- **[BREAKING NEWS IN YOUR INBOX:](#)** [Click here to sign up for our breaking news e-mail alerts. It's free.](#)
- **[PHOTOS AND VIDEO:](#)** [Click here to check out our multimedia page.](#)
- **[SUBMIT YOUR OWN:](#)** [Upload your photos on our photo-sharing site -- SeeYa.](#)

Regional proponents of rail passenger improvements also got a boost last week when Vice President Joe Biden, once a regular rail commuter, said \$1.3 billion for Amtrak in the economic stimulus package will go toward long-overdue infrastructure upgrades and expanded passenger rail capacity.

The national passenger railroad, long criticized for its reliance on government subsidies, has strong support from the Obama administration, Biden said. Biden noted that every passenger rail system in the world relies on subsidies and that for far too long Amtrak has been starved for cash.

Merritt said he is hopeful that legislation like that he and Hughes have introduced will help push some of those federal funds to East Texas, though it's too early to tell how much.

"We're still trying to ferret that out," Merritt said.

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

BLOGS

- **Talk of East Texas:** [Recent rain forces city road repairs](#)
- **BizBuzz:** [Dana Corp. reports quarterly loss of \\$264 million](#)
- **Sideline View:** [Final Four picks](#)

Vote for this story!

Find this article at:

http://www.news-journal.com/search/content/news/stories/2009/03/17/03172009_high_speed_rail.html

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.