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## Leaders aim for better scheduling, service

By MAGGIE SOUZA

Wednesday, October 08, 2008

Trains that are on time and better connectivity to Dallas are two goals local rail advocates hope will be accomplished with the help of the recently passed federal Railroad Safety Improvement Act.

Leaders of the East Texas Corridor Council met Tuesday with a small group of supporters to discuss how the new legislation will affect the region. Part of the bill is designed to increase safety measures of trains and tracks. But the part that got attention Tuesday was the bill's second part, the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act.



Michael Cavazos/News-Journal Photo  
(ENLARGE)

Harrison County Judge Richard Anderson speaks Tuesday about the progress being made in building a coalition of local, state and federal officials to strengthen and expand higher speed passenger rail system in the region at the Amtrak station in Longview.

Sitting aboard a remodeled 1940s-era train car parked at the Longview station, council officials Tim Vaughn and Richard Anderson explained that the rail safety act comes at an important juncture in economic forces and transportation trends.

"We're sitting today in what can become a very efficient, effective and environmentally friendly method of transportation," said Anderson, chairman of the governmental affairs committee.

A number of factors contributed to the emerging need for faster and better rail service, said Anderson and Vaughn, who is chairman of the council. Reduced passenger capacity on airplanes, high gasoline prices and the search for alternate transportation for heavy interstate cargo have prompted interest in the possibilities of rail.

Record train ridership evidences the phenomenon, Anderson said. In August, the number of Amtrak's Texas Eagle passengers was up more than 40 percent from last year, according to company statistics. The Longview station averaged 78 passengers a day from October 2007 to August.

The rail safety act, which as of Tuesday was awaiting President Bush's signature, could help increase those numbers even more, Vaughn and Anderson said.

Longview and East Texas should see both short- and long-term effects from the act.

One provision in the bill authorizes the national Surface Transportation Board to investigate the cause of train delays, issue penalties and recommend solutions. This should help Amtrak's passenger train service, which often is held up by freight trains, according to the National Association of Railroad Passengers.

The long-term benefit is more and better infrastructure that would make Amtrak a convenient and fast mode of travel, Anderson said.

The rail act authorizes \$13 billion for Amtrak, including \$5.3 billion in capital grants and \$1.9 billion in grants to improve intercity passenger rail. The next step is distributing the money throughout the different rail lines, which will happen over five years.

One example of infrastructure improvements that the grants could help fund is a double-track along the Interstate 20 corridor, from Dallas to Longview, Anderson said. By laying down a track alongside the existing one, passenger travel would flow more efficiently, he said.

"Fewer waits, shorter waits and capital infrastructure buildup," Anderson said, putting in a nutshell what he hopes the area will see because of the Railroad Safety Improvement Act.

"Rail is going to be the way to go in this new environment," Vaughn said.

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