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Longview mayor announces train task force in response to gas costs

By JIMMY ISAAC

Friday, May 30, 2008

With soaring fuel prices and local airline flights in jeopardy, Mayor Jay Dean wants Longview to chug toward another form of transportation.

Dean announced Thursday that he's forming a task force to help develop reliable passenger rail service in Longview.



Kevin Green/News-Journal Photo (ENLARGE)

Joy Smith, assistant superintendent of Amtrak's Southwest Division, speaks Thursday during the Longview Partnership's Business Advocacy Luncheon at Pinecrest Country Club in Longview.

The announcement followed an address from Amtrak Southwest Division Assistant Superintendent Joy Smith to local officials and industry leaders during the Longview Partnership Business Advocacy Luncheon at Pinecrest Country Club.

Tim Vaughn, chairman of the East Texas Corridor Council and former White Oak mayor, will serve as task force chairman. Other members of the group have yet to be determined, Dean said.

It will likely explore a comprehensive network of multimodal components to transport goods, services and people efficiently between Longview and the East Coast by expanding passenger service to Shreveport, according to Dean's mayoral assistant, Dietrich Johnson.

"We're going to turn every rock and figure out how to make this happen in the very near future," Dean said.

The announcement comes one day after American Airlines said it might cut air service between Dallas and Gregg County from three daily flights to two flights. The airline is replacing existing American Eagle jets with larger planes that have more seats.

Longtime rail advocate Natalie Rabicoff said the announcement was proof that it takes patience and perseverance to accomplish things, "and eventually leadership hears you when the timing is right for them."

Dean said his latest move results from an earlier task force, which formed the city's Vision 2010 plan about three years ago. South Longview redevelopment and the need for a multimodal transportation station were among Vision 2010's goals. This latest task force on passenger rail service will help the city determine how to work with Union Pacific Railroad officials for funding strategies for a integrated multimodal station, he said.

Tom Mulligan, passenger train operations director for Union Pacific, said he's committed to getting the appropriate company officials together with the task force and other local leaders to determine Longview's next step.

"It's got to make business sense," Mulligan said.

Smith agreed, noting that Mineola's fight to save its Amtrak passenger stop several years ago was successful because of Longview's and Marshall's help.

"Without Marshall and without Longview, I don't believe we would have had the stop as fast as we did," Smith said. "Every American citizen should have a choice. We must give our children and our grandchildren the same choices that we had when we wanted to travel."

Dean said he understands the need for choice, particularly after paying \$4.69 a gallon for diesel fuel Thursday morning.

"I'm not going to get rid of my truck, and most of you won't get rid of your car," the mayor said, "but every opportunity to diversify our transportation is important. One of the major hiccups is the cost of fuel and services. That's the reality that we live in. We've got to figure out how to deal with it."



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Joe Yanuzzi, general superintendent for Amtrak's southwest division, said the biggest stumbling blocks will be a lack of infrastructure and equipment. Orders for new locomotives take more than two years to fill, he said.

"The passion and the fever out here with the people wanting to expand the train service; the fever has gotten to me now," said Yanuzzi, who was making his first trip to Texas from California. "We have to do something."

Johnson said task force members will likely be announced next week.

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