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On track? Local panel could become part of bigger movement

LONGVIEW NEWS-JOURNAL

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During a week when there was a good deal of local buzz about the Texas Department of Transportation's plans for routing the new Interstate 69, another transportation issue that will directly impact East Texas was garnering even bigger headlines across the nation.

The U.S. House of Representatives on Wednesday flew in the face of a White House veto threat as it passed a \$14.9 billion Amtrak funding bill by a veto-proof margin of 311-104. The U.S. Senate has already approved similar legislation to fund the nation's passenger rail system for the next five years — also by a veto-proof margin.

Although there are differences to work out between the House and Senate bills and it remains to be seen if the votes will hold for a possible veto override, the news so far is encouraging. The strong support for passenger rail funding could be a sign that our elected leaders are finally recognizing the advantages of maintaining a vibrant passenger rail system as part of the transportation mix — advantages that leaders in Europe and Japan have long recognized and supported.

In East Texas, local leaders and activists have also recognized the important role that passenger rail service can play in our communities. That's why it was no surprise when Longview Mayor Jay Dean on Thursday named six local people to a task force on passenger rail service.

We won't overstate the prospects of what the local task force can do. Even though its commission is to establish goals and funding recommendations for the efficient transportation of goods, services and people, even the most avid optimists have to accept that one task force in Longview is not going to achieve the policy and attitude changes that would be necessary to make passenger rail emerge as a major player in transportation again.

What must be remembered, however, is that broad change can not really occur unless many communities such as Longview are in the quest to expand the use of efficient passenger rail service to move people across Texas — and across the country.

For two decades, community activists along the route of the Texas Eagle have been responsible for keeping alive the long-distance passenger rail service linking Chicago and San Antonio. People in Longview such as local Amtrak employee Griff Hubbard and long-time community activist Natalie Rabicoff have played a major role in working with other communities to keep passenger rail service alive in East Texas communities such as Longview, Marshall and Mineola.

Grass roots volunteers along the Eagle route have been effective in securing the support of key government officials such as U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison to maintain the financial and political support Amtrak needs. They have succeeded even in the face of skepticism and faint support from the Bush administration.

Now, with gasoline and diesel prices skyrocketing and airlines being forced to scale back flights and services, passenger rail service could emerge as a very viable alternative for people who want to travel from city to city or even state to state.

One task force in East Texas is not going to solve our nation's energy crisis or fully shape its transportation future. But many such task forces in small, but vital American cities could begin reaching common conclusions about passenger rail — conclusions that include that it might not only be viable, but essential for our communities.

So to the members of Longview's passenger rail task force — Chairman Tim Vaughn, Shelby Moore, Brian Bunt, Keith Honey, Dennis Suiter and Hubbard — we say thank you for your service and now get to work. Your efforts along with those of similar groups in communities across our nation could well turn the tide of transportation.

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