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Longview rail answers elusive

By JIMMY ISAAC

Saturday, February 07, 2009

Uncertainty dominated talks at the Longview Mayor's Task Force on Passenger Rail on Friday.

Mayor Jay Dean formed the committee in June to develop reliable passenger rail service in Longview. The group's first priority is securing the city's Amtrak station on Pacific Avenue. Union Pacific Railroad Co. owns the station but is negotiating a deal to transfer ownership to the city, Task Force Chairman Tim Vaughn said.

Two local agencies — East Texas Council of Governments and the city's Metropolitan Planning Organization — have submitted applications for federal dollars to renovate the station, according to senior transportation planner Karen Owen and Gregg County Rail District Chairman Griff Hubbard. Owen and Hubbard are task force members.

"We can't control it if the stimulus package is passed," Vaughn said. "What we can control is ownership of whether we're ready if the money is available."

If station renovations are included in any stimulus package approved by the U.S. Congress, Longview could have as little as 75 days to obligate at least 50 percent of those funds to the project, Owen said. That means the city should have ownership of the station and designs and cost estimates set, she said.

A firm cost estimate for renovating the station has yet to be determined, Vaughn added.

"It depends a lot on the delivery of documents from Union Pacific," he said. "It also depends on what could be rolling out in the next two to three weeks from the federal government."



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