

Officials: Rail proposal carries benefits

New system will create alternate evacuation options, trim reliance on cars, authorities say

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An agreement between transportation officials from East Texas and the Dallas-Fort Worth region could be the turning point for getting high speed passenger rail service along the Interstate 20 corridor. The first railroad spike is still years away, if it happens.

The idea for high speed passenger service between East Texas and the Dallas metroplex is one of several similar proposals across the state. There are ideas for two proposed south central Texas corridors for high speed rail to connect Austin, Dallas, Houston, San Antonio and Killeen.

Local rail advocates say the service would create additional evacuation options in case of disasters and trim the reliance on automobiles and fuel burning.

It could also relieve traffic on existing railroads and provide reliable transit for East Texans, according to rail and Longview city officials. They point to the Amtrak Texas Eagle, which has been taken off the national system because of delays at several stops along the route. Because the Texas Eagle has been taken off the national system, its passengers usually must wait overnight in large cities when they try to connect with another Amtrak route.

"You have freight and passenger traffic on the same track ... Everywhere (the Texas Eagle) goes, it's running late," Longview Partnership President Kelly Hall said on Aug. 7 during a signing of a memorandum of understanding in which about 75 officials in the region agreed to help spur rail expansion from Fort Worth to Shreveport. She said existing rail lines need dual tracks — lines that run parallel to double transit capacity.

"It's so much more cost effective to build new rail than build new interstate highways," Hall said. "We just need the dual tracks to make this happen, and that's going to happen with a lot of lobbying efforts."

Pushing for the system

Among the rail advocates in this region is the East Texas Corridor Council, a group that began with informal conversations about six years ago to save the Amtrak Texas Eagle. The council joined officials from the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex to secure a loan that kept the train running temporarily until the Texas Eagle got help from Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchinson at the federal level, according to Celia Boswell, chairman of the council.

"(Hutchinson) didn't start out pro-rail. She started from a grassroots request from those of us in East Texas to get through some hard spots," said Boswell. "She listened and responded, which led me to believe that maybe the system works."

For the system to continue working in Boswell and other rail advocates' favor, they will need support from many different sources. In 2003, a high speed rail corridor between Austin and San Antonio received funding for planning under a \$284 billion federal transportation bill. That stretch could one day become part of the Texas T-Bone, a connection of high speed rail routes that would reach Houston, Dallas, Killeen and south Texas. An Interstate 20 corridor would bring East Texas and Shreveport onto the tracks.

To get local efforts off the ground and running, a memorandum of understanding was signed in August between the East Texas Council of Governments and the North Central Texas Council of Governments in support of a high speed rail along the Interstate 20 corridor. More than 75 elected officials, rail advocates and residents from both regions signed a document that some of them say will provide a new reliable form of transportation for two growing regions.

"There's no longer reliability on the roadway system, because you could have an accident or construction on the interstate. In Texas, we're blessed with a redundant system, so if Interstate 20 shuts down, you can take U.S. 80," said Michael Morris, transportation director of the North Central Texas Council of Governments. "We know everyone is not going to take the train, but more and more, a larger share of travelers will go by passenger train. That's why we're building them as fast as we can."

Numbers at a high

According to a recent story in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, the number of passengers using the Texas Eagle from Chicago through northeast Texas and on to San Antonio has more than doubled, and ticket revenue has increased about two-thirds in the past decade. Ridership growth leaped from about 150,000 passengers a year in 2003 to more than 230,000 passengers by 2004, and it has remained at that plateau ever since. Since 2000, ticket revenue has remained between \$13 million and \$16.8 million — which was recorded in 2006.

Money-maker?

Despite the increase and ridership and revenue, only one Amtrak route — the high-speed service between Washington, D.C., and New York City — captures enough revenue to cover its costs, according to Salya Thallam, a former fiscal and urban policy analyst for the Arizona-based Goldwater Institute. He is now a research fellow and graduate student in Washington who has written and spoken on issues of urban growth, transportation, fiscal and tax policy and regulation.

Thallam said New York City and Washington are ideal places to subsidize rail transit, but the issue transforms when considering Western cities and states where growth and a dependency on cars developed during post-World War II growth. The landscape of cities like Houston and Dallas is spread out, to less densely populated areas away from the central core, which lead to the development of regional cores, or suburbs.

"All this said, a new rail line may have at best an initial minor effect on adjacent traffic. But as cars become cheaper and cheaper (relative to the median income), people will always prefer to travel by car and truck when they can, and they will be able to do so more and more," Thallam said in an interview. Thallam noted that total transit-miles have increased several-fold since the 1950s while total passenger-miles carried on rail has fallen from near 50 percent during World War II to less than 2 percent now.

Local enthusiasm

Local Amtrak and rail advocates, who report that more and more tickets for passenger rail service are being sold in Longview, are not deterred. Getting people to want to use rail service, though, has been complicated by delays in the Texas Eagle schedule, according to volunteers with the East Texas Corridor Council. Because Amtrak shares a rail line owned by Union Pacific Railroad, the Texas Eagle waits for freight trains to clear the track before it can depart the station. On Tuesday, passengers heading west to Dallas on a 9 a.m. departure were delayed about 90 minutes. Some days, the wait is three hours long, according to Griff Hubbard, president of the Gregg County Rail District.

"Union Pacific is a private corporate and they're overrun with business," said Natalie Rabicoff, a founding member of the Texas Eagle Marketing and Performance Group, a coalition of mayors and rail advocates in Texas and Arkansas. She says new rail lines need to parallel existing lines just to meet existing freight demands.

"We're going to have to double- and triple-track places that aren't double- and triple-tracked," Rabicoff said. "The freight train doesn't have enough track, from what it sounds like. That's why Amtrak is made late."

The cost

In a brochure the East Texas Corridor Council released in February 2005, it was estimated that the cost of building high speed rail lines between Marshall and Dallas is between \$235 million and \$250 million — about the same cost as building a clover-leaf freeway interchange.

Rep. Tommy Merritt, R-Kilgore, introduced a proposal in this year's legislative session to create a high speed rail authority for the Texas-Louisiana and Texas-Mexico border regions. A House committee voted 5-0 in support of the bill, but it was never scheduled for full House debate and died.

"Mr. Merritt's bill is very forward thinking," said Hubbard, who spoke in favor of the bill before the 5-0 committee vote.

Hubbard told representatives on the panel that passenger rail service should not stop at a border, but that Texas should work for interstate connectivity with Louisiana, Arkansas and other neighbors. A North Central Texas Council of Governments study reported that everything inside a circle connecting Little Rock to Oklahoma City, to Dallas-Fort Worth, to San Antonio, to Houston and then north around Lufkin, Shreveport and back to Little Rock make the sixth-largest gross domestic product, or economy, in the world, Hubbard said.

"You can't connect the major population centers of 500 miles or less without coming through the front door or the back door of East Texas," he said. "That's why I know it's not a population issue."

The need for high speed

Texas is the second-largest state in the nation, with about 23 million people, according to the latest U.S. Census Bureau estimates. That population is predicted to reach 50 million by 2040.

"The explosion of bodies moving here and across the state, we've got to have another mode of traffic," said Rabicoff. "This is not just for freight and passenger rail, but it's also for emergency evacuation, which we hope we never need. We all can't get in our cars, and rail service is the one mode of transportation that moves lots of people and freight."

Rail advocates believe expansion of passenger rail service, including high speed rail, would ease congestion on existing freight rail lines.

"I don't know if you'll ever get the Texans out of their car, but it could potentially provide a small town resident a way to work," Mineola Mayor Pete Smith said. "It reduces pollution, plus it provides an opportunity that you might not have otherwise, because sometimes the small town doesn't pay the same wages as the larger cities."

Boswell adds that a high speed rail project between East Texas and Dallas-Fort Worth may not see substantive action for several years. The Interstate 35 corridor is the most congested in Texas, she said. After that, it's the east-west corridor, which brings East Texas into play. Still, the region must continue to work with neighbors in Dallas, Louisiana, Arkansas and others to work as a team for federal transportation dollars, she said.

"Transportation has to be seamless. We don't stop once you pass out of the East Texas corridor," said Boswell. "It gets us working together for scarce dollars. All transportation things are partnerships. They have to be. As we work together with scarce dollars, we accomplish things."

She said that coalition must lobby federal and state lawmakers to get the funds for planning routes through the regions. The message should include that partnerships have been formed with adjoining urban centers, and that help is needed to get the job done, she said.

Boswell adds, "If I was a representative of the people, I would hear that message."

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