

April 19, 2008

## Ark-La-Tex leaders work together for Amtrak

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Local leaders hope public interest will grow in commuter rail service as Texas, Arkansas and Louisiana officials work to bring Amtrak to Shreveport-Bossier City.

Politicians and economic development heads gathered Thursday in Marshall, Texas, at what many called a historic meeting. They discussed strategy to lure federal money for passenger trains that could run up to 115 mph along Interstate 20.

The Shreveport City Council, Caddo Commission and Bossier Police Jury recently passed resolutions calling for cross-state cooperation in the project, which likely is 10-15 years from completion.

"What we need to do is get some excitement in Shreveport," said Sam Gilliam, the city's economic development director, who attended the meeting. "You have a whole generation of people now in decision-making roles who have never ridden on a train."

What the group calls the "Louisiana Leg" of the South Central High Speed Rail Corridor would connect Shreveport-Bossier City with Marshall, Texas, and Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas. Eventually, leaders hope, the line would extend along the I-20 corridor to Meridian, Miss., connecting the area to the East Coast.

Besides quicker ground trips for riders between northwest Louisiana and Dallas, leaders tout benefits such as relieving highway congestion, cutting consumer spending on fuel and more environmentally friendly travel.

The South Central High Speed Rail Corridor serves the area from San Antonio, Texas, to the DFW Metroplex, eastward to Marshall, and north to Texarkana, Texas, and Little Rock, Ark.

A study would cost about \$6 million, or about \$6,000 per mile, of which the South Central High Speed Rail Corridor has 954, according to Richard Anderson, a judge for Harrison County, Texas, who is spearheading the project.

For comparison's sake, Anderson said, extending the line from Marshall to Shreveport-Bossier City would cost less than the price of adding a cloverleaf overpass to an interstate highway — about \$250 million.

"In reaching across the border to representatives of North Louisiana as well as representatives from Arkansas, we started what amounts to a grassroots attempt to combine the efforts of local governments in contacting our federal officials to request federal assistance with the funding of the planning and engineering study," Anderson said in a letter to Ark-La-Tex officials.

The project would take securing right-of-ways from Union Pacific Railroad, Anderson said.

"There will be designated slots for passenger and designated slots for freight," the judge said. "We've got to expand the freight, too. That's their cash flow."

Griff Hubbard, executive director of the East Texas Corridor Council, said the idea of Amtrak service for northwest Louisiana has been "kicked around" his entire 37-year career in rail service.

"Never has there been a regional consensus with elected officials from states of Arkansas, Louisiana

and Texas to begin to discuss how to bring it about," Hubbard said.

Hubbard credits former Bossier City mayor George Dement with keeping the Amtrak momentum alive. But the timing wasn't right during his time in office.

Estimates for maintaining one mile of interstate ranges from \$10-12 million. But up keeping one mile of railroad is about \$1.3 million. Gasoline prices projected to hit \$4 a gallon this summer can only help the future of commuter trains, Hubbard said.

"Maybe the answer is passenger rail has reached its cost-effectiveness era," Hubbard said.

Texas and Louisiana leaders plan to meet again next month in Marshall to sign a proposed Memorandum of Understanding in support of local Amtrak service.

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