

## Dallas By Rail? Idea Is Gaining Local Steam

Terry Britt, staff writer

The ongoing climb of gasoline pump prices could be opening the door for something not seen since before World War II.

**By Terry Britt**

Staff Writer

The ongoing climb of gasoline pump prices could be opening the door for something not seen since before World War II.

That was when passenger rail service between rural areas and the bigger cities flourished. Now, counties like Van Zandt are positioning themselves for a possible rail line renaissance.

Allen Roush is on the advisory board of the Van Zandt County Rural Rail District. At the district's board of directors meeting Tuesday, Roush said the idea is winning over minds of local citizens.

"It's amazing to see the interest continuing to grow for the concept of getting on a rail service and traveling to Dallas," Roush said.

As gasoline has risen to \$3.50 per gallon for regular unleaded, or more in some areas, people are wondering about alternatives to driving to Dallas or Tyler, he said.

"I think everybody has come to the realization gas is not going to get any cheaper," Roush said.

The rail district's meeting took place just four days before National Train Day, which had special events set at the Texas and Pacific Railway Museum in Marshall.

One of those events is the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the East Texas Council of Governments, North Central Texas Council of Governments and Northwest Louisiana Council of Governments.

This document is designed to build interstate support for a strengthened passenger rail service in the Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas (Ark-La-Tex) region.

Van Zandt County Rural Rail District President Vic Weatherholt said the county needs to get itself into the future passenger rail picture.

"We've got to get past the stepchild label for commuter rail. It can't be ignored any longer," he said. "There are too many success stories coming out of the east and west."

Board member Lettie Clark agreed with the situation, saying, "We've got to wake up and get moving."

### **Population flow reversal?**

Passenger rail ridership started a steep decline after World War II for the same reason rail freight business fell off.

With mass produced automobiles stealing the spotlight and an interstate highway system being built to support them, the train took a back seat in the minds of rural area citizens.

That was followed by the decades of urban exodus that brought more people into rural areas, commuting long distances to and from jobs in the bigger cities.

However, as Roush said, that has suddenly become less attractive or feasible for many.

"I have spoken with people who are concerned the flow of population is going to turn around and head back to town," he said.

That is why, he continued, a push for business and industrial recruitment in the county should stand alongside commuter rail efforts.

"Over the years, we've become dependent on Dallas, and to some extent, Tyler. If we don't start becoming more self-dependent for jobs, we're going to really find ourselves up a creek."

A statistical table handed out to board members Tuesday could back up that statement. Among estimates of population increases in area counties between July 1, 2006 and July 1, 2007, neighboring Kaufman County jumped 4,684.

Van Zandt County's increase during that same time stood at 186.

Weatherholt said the effort to bring passenger rail service could help prevent a possible future loss of population.

"The more we can do and get together with other rail districts in the area, the more we are involved in it, the more likely it will become a reality," he said.