



# Fort Worth's planned commuter rail to D/FW Airport gets initial OK

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The Federal Transit Administration has given preliminary approval for a \$758 million project that would create a 37-mile passenger rail line connecting Fort Worth to Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

When DART's new light-rail service to D/FW Airport opens in 2014, construction could already be under way on the 14-station Tarrant County project.

Fort Worth transit officials announced the new initiative this week.

"This is a major milestone in the development of our commuter rail project that will provide service to thousands of riders across Tarrant County from southwest Fort Worth to Grapevine and into D/FW Airport," said Dick Ruddell, president of the Fort Worth Transportation Authority.

The approval is only one of several that will be required, however, and it does not commit the federal government to fund the project.

The Fort Worth agency, known as The T, wants the federal government to cover about 54 percent of the total cost, or about \$415 million.

Competition for those funds will be fierce, as FTA regional administrator Robert Patrick said in a letter to Ruddell announcing the preliminary approval. Patrick said The T will be in a better position if it can boost local funding to half the total price tag, leaving \$380 million needed from the federal government.

Other challenges include securing permission from freight rail companies and from Dallas Area Rapid Transit to access some of the tracks needed for the new service.

But Joan Hunter, a spokeswoman for The T, said negotiations with those entities are under way and look promising.

The new line would be on commuter rail, making it more like the Trinity Railway Express than DART's light-rail network.

The Fort Worth line represents half of a much larger project regional transportation leaders have long envisioned as the 62-mile Cotton Belt corridor, stretching from Fort Worth to the airport to an eastern terminus in either Richardson or Plano, where it would connect with DART's existing Red Line.

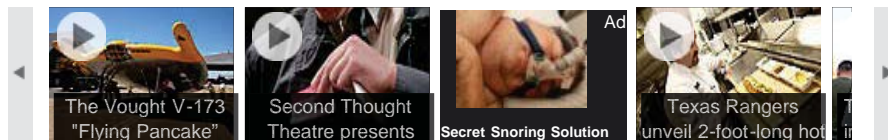
The North Central Texas Council of Governments is lining up proposals for funding the full Cotton Belt, an effort that would be boosted considerably if the FTA agreed to provide half or more of the funding for the western half of that project.

The council is considering ways to lure private investors to pay for much of the eastern half of the project in return for decades of guaranteed revenue. The effort is known as the Innovative Finance Initiative.

Hunter said federal support for the western half of the line will only make the full project more feasible.

"The T fully supports the Innovative Finance Initiative and has been an active participant in the IFI since the effort's inception," she said.

The Regional Transportation Council will consider options for funding the full Cotton Belt as soon as this spring.



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