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Group aims to raise \$10 billion for high-speed rail in Texas

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LEIPZIG, Germany -- They travel more than 200 mph, and during 48 years of operation in Japan, they have never been involved in a fatal crash.

They are bullet trains, a form of transportation many Texans thought they'd never see -- unless they were on vacation in Asia or Europe. But rail advocates say a proposal to build a high-speed line connecting Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston may happen a lot sooner than many residents think -- possibly by 2020.

A group led by Central Japan Railway Co. that includes notable Texans such as former Harris County Judge Robert Eckels is seeking roughly \$10 billion in private investment. Officials with that group, who plan to brief the Regional Transportation Council today in Arlington, say they will not ask for federal or state funding.

During the International Transport Forum last week in Leipzig, Germany, company Chairman Yoshiyuki Kasai offered guests an overview of how the privatized service in Japan aims to make travel seamless and painless for customers.

"It provides a very efficient means of transport," Kasai, using an interpreter, told several hundred guests during a panel discussion.

"If you want to move from one point to another, you don't have to change your schedule. Once you go to a station, you find a train already coming in five minutes. Then, if your train is more than five minutes away, there's an express system that allows people to change trains anytime."

Texas tries to catch up

In the United States, high-speed rail has languished a bit since 2009, when President Barack Obama announced a long-term vision that included connecting 80 percent of the United States to ultramodern passenger service within a quarter-century. Since then, about \$10.5 billion in federal funds have been provided for the initial high-speed-rail projects, but the work is falling short in some areas.

Officials in Florida, Ohio and Wisconsin sent high-speed-rail money back to Washington amid growing criticism and heated political debate over the projects' cost. Texas was behind from the outset, although officials say they are now making progress in studying the potential of high-speed rail connecting the state's largest cities and beyond.

The Texas Department of Transportation didn't even have a rail division to help regulate the process until 2009. Now the agency is providing planning information to several entities that might be interested in developing rail lines within Texas and to neighboring states, Texas Transportation Commissioner Bill Meadows of Fort Worth said.

Meanwhile, the private effort by Central Japan Railway, which has opened offices in Texas, has flown below the radar but appears to be gaining steam.

"We're in the process of doing the route studies, the environmental work, pooling the engineering work to determine the best route between Houston and Dallas," said Eckels, president of Texas Central Railway, a Japanese-U.S. partnership previously known as Lone Star High-Speed Rail Llc.

"It is a highly capital-intensive project, but we believe it is commercially viable," Eckels said. "We are not looking for operational subsidies from the state or federal government."

Regional issues

In North Texas, one key undecided issue is where to put the first -- and perhaps only -- station. Many regional council members favor a station at Dallas/Fort Worth Airport. That would set up a multimodal connection for air travelers, and the airport's central location would provide more or less equal access for surrounding cities.

Others argue that the project could be built at a lower cost by connecting in Dallas.

Also undecided is precisely where the tracks would be built. The rail line could be installed in existing freight railroad right of way between Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston, but it would have to be separate from freight operations, Eckels said. Such a move would require the cooperation of freight companies such as Union Pacific Railroad and Fort Worth-based BNSF Railway, which own many of the tracks in Texas.

Also, there would be no railroad crossings. The bullet trains would have to go over, under or around car traffic.

Money raised privately would be paid back with riders' fares. They would be competitive and in many cases less than airfares, Eckels said.

Reliability and safety are among the service's top selling points.

In Japan, the average delay per train is 36 seconds per year -- although trains between Tokyo and Shin-Osaka can average a minute per year or more because of typhoons and heavy snowfall.

Last year, when an earthquake struck off the coast of Japan, a bullet train operated by another company, East Japan Railway Co., had been traveling fast, Chairman Satoshi Seino said.

But, Seino told the International Transport Forum, the train's emergency equipment turned on and automatically brought the train to a halt, preventing damage and injuries.

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