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Details of DFW bullet train proposal emerge

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ARLINGTON -- If high-speed rail comes to North Texas by 2020, the bullet trains will initially rely on the area's road system -- not public transportation -- to get most of the riders from the end of the line to their final destination, an official said.

"We do think that for the first few years the system is in operation, the collector-distributor system will largely be highways," said Robert Eckels, president of Texas Central Railway, which wants to build a line featuring trains running every 15 to 20 minutes from Dallas-Fort Worth to Houston.

"The mass-transit systems aren't built out to handle the kind of transit they have in Tokyo, but that will come in time."

On Thursday, Eckels briefed the Regional Transportation Council about plans to bring 200-mph trains to North Texas, possibly by 2020, in a partnership with Central Japan Railway Co., which operates bullet trains connecting Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka.

The company is seeking roughly \$10 billion in private investment to build the estimated 240-mile line, and it will not seek federal or state money. Eckels stressed that \$10 billion is an early estimate. Depending on factors such as the location of the Dallas-Fort Worth station, the cost could be much higher, or even lower.

But once the train stops in Dallas-Fort Worth, lots of public money may be needed to get riders from the station to their final destination in the region, planners say.

Accelerating planning

Texas Central Railway's proposal could vault Texas to the forefront of the nation's effort to build high-speed-rail lines comparable to Europe's and Asia's.

But the momentum is catching Metroplex planners a bit off guard. They now realize that they need to speed up preparations of the area's transportation system.

"If we're going to keep up with our partners, we need to get more skin in the game and make sure we're not sitting at the curb," said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. He said that next month he will ask the transportation council to set aside \$1 million in federal transportation funds so his staff can accelerate the planning for high-speed rail.

The tracks would likely be built in existing rail corridors and possibly some highway right of way, roughly parallel to Interstate 45.

Trains would run on exclusive tracks and would have no crossings or other interactions with automobiles or freight trains.

The region does have a long-term goal to build a mass-transit system that reaches most area cities with a combination of buses, commuter rail and light rail. There are many other options for connecting to high-speed rail, including bicycles, walking and, of course, automobiles.

Cities could also benefit tremendously from development around high-speed rail.

Morris described three revenue sources associated with bullet trains: "Fares, parking and economic development."

State proposals

At the state level, planners are juggling several proposals for high-speed rail, said Bill Glavin, Texas Department of Transportation rail division director.

Federal funds have been awarded to study a proposed line from Oklahoma City to Fort Worth, Austin and San Antonio, roughly running along a corridor used by Amtrak.

Within the Metroplex, it's still not clear where a station should be. Many elected officials favor putting a hub in or near Dallas/Fort Worth Airport or the CentrePort development just south of the airport.

Other rail supporters are working to take smaller steps, including the expansion and modernization of Amtrak service to Fort Worth.

Texas Central Railway wants to be a good neighbor and build a bullet train line that blends in with the rest of North Texas' transportation system, Eckels said, but its current business model doesn't incorporate services beyond a direct line to Houston.

"The system we are working on is a city pairing," he told the transportation council. "We are not working on a national rail plan."

As for the bigger picture, that's up to the mayors, county commissioners and other public officials who make up the council.

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