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Rail line for Dallas-Fort Worth bullet trains could follow I-30

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ARLINGTON - Bullet trains may someday whiz past motorists stuck in traffic on Interstate 30 between Fort Worth and Dallas.

North Texas transportation planners say they want to study the feasibility of building elevated high-speed railroad tracks above the automobile lanes on I-30, creating room for trains capable of going up to 200 mph.

Trains would be able to make the trip from downtown Dallas to Fort Worth in about 18 minutes, possibly including a brief stop at a future Arlington station, said Tarrant County Commissioner Gary Fickes. Fickes said he would prefer a different high-speed rail plan in which trains travel north and south through the Metroplex, perhaps up the Texas 360 corridor from Mansfield to Dallas/Fort Worth Airport – but he's open to the idea of running trains east-west on I-30.

"Would I rather have it up 360? Yeah. But if we can get high-speed rail to downtown Fort Worth, that's a home run for Fort Worth," he said.

The idea – which may not be acted on for years – is a dramatic departure from high-speed rail discussions of the past. Those discussions focused on building a bullet train system along the east-west freight railroad corridor between the region's two largest cities.

But Union Pacific Railroad, which owns those freight tracks, has repeatedly shunned requests to use its property for passenger rail beyond Amtrak, said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

"We've been trying to talk to them for close to 20 years about some joint use, and the answer is 'H-E-double-hockey-sticks no,' so we're moving on," Morris told members of the Regional Transportation Council last week.

The RTC last week agreed to pay an additional \$640,000 to continue its high-speed rail planning during the next two years. That's in addition to \$640,000 approved months ago.

The Texas Department of Transportation hasn't begun discussions with other regional leaders about placing bullet trains on I-30. But the agency is willing to consider placing rails "on I-30 and any other roadway that makes sense and fits geometrically," spokeswoman Jodi Hodges said.

It's unusual but not unprecedented for highways and rail lines to share right of way in Texas. For example, in Irving, the state Transportation Department reached an agreement with Dallas Area Rapid Transit to build light rail along state property near Texas 114 and Loop 12, near the former Texas Stadium site.

It may never happen

Construction of a high-speed rail system is likely years away -- and there's no guarantee it will ever happen. But in recent years, evidence has mounted that some kind of futuristic rail system will eventually be built in Texas.

A Japanese company, JR Central Railway, has opened Texas offices and plans to submit a proposal to the state to build a high-speed-rail line from D/FW to Houston, with private-sector dollars and no government funding. That group's precise plan, including a proposed route, hasn't been made public, but details could be released as soon as next year, officials said.

JR Central Railway is seeking investors to chip in roughly \$10 billion to possibly connect Houston and Dallas by 2020.

Many Fort Worth-area elected leaders, like Fickes, would prefer that bullet trains come up the middle of the Metroplex along the Texas 360 corridor, with a direct connection to DFW Airport and dual extensions to Dallas and Fort Worth. But supporters of downtown development in Dallas and Fort Worth have argued that having the trains first stop at DFW Airport and then split to the east and west makes the downtowns less attractive as destinations.

If I-30 were available for high-speed rail, the trains could arrive from Houston along the I-45 corridor, stop in downtown Dallas (perhaps at the old Reunion Arena site) and then continue quickly to a stop near Arlington's entertainment district followed by a stop in downtown Fort Worth.

That option could give Arlington a more prominent role in the region's long-term transit plans, officials said. For example, Arlington could then build its own north-south rail connection from the I-30/stadium site south to the University of Texas at Arlington, and north to DFW Airport.

Arlington voters have rejected raising sales taxes for transit three times since 1980, but some regional transportation planners say high-speed rail may be a bold enough concept to sell to even the most skeptical residents.

In a related development, the plan includes moving Amtrak service off the Union Pacific freight lines and onto the Trinity Railway Express commuter line that connects Dallas and Fort Worth through Northeast Tarrant County. The TRE line would be double-tracked so more trains could travel simultaneously.

Three Metroplex stops

All the high-speed rail plans are in the early planning stage. The idea is for elected and appointed officials in the region to get on top of the issue, so that whoever arrives in the area with a proposal to build bullet trains can be handed a blueprint of the corridors where such service would be acceptable.

But the Regional Transportation Council has already agreed on one important point: the area needs multiple high-speed rail stations -- and not just a single stop in downtown Dallas.

"This plan does endorse the three-station concept -- at a minimum, downtown Dallas, DFW Airport and downtown Fort Worth," said Tom Shelton, senior program manager at the council governments. "There's many different routes a private sector implementer could choose to do that."

Nationally, the concept of high-speed rail has faltered since 2009, when President Obama announced he wanted to connect 80 percent of the United States within a quarter-century. About \$10.5 billion in federal funds have been provided for the high-speed-rail projects, but the work is falling short.

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, and didn't even have a rail division until 2009. But the agency is now studying the proposed Houston-to-DFW route - armed with \$15 million in federal funds - and has also initiated a study of high-speed rail service from Oklahoma City to South Texas, following the route used by Amtrak's Heartland Flyer and Texas Eagle. Both of those Amtrak lines stop daily in Fort Worth.

The agency received a \$5.8 million high-speed-rail grant last year for that study.

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