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High-speed rail gains steam

by Brian Walzel, Marie Leonard

August 3, 2012

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Future funding sources still up in the air

Plans for a high-speed rail line connecting Houston with the Dallas-Fort Worth region are slowly gaining momentum as local and state agencies, both public and private, explore options on how best to build a potential line. Those options include from where the funding may come from and where the line would be built.

The America 2050 report, conducted by the Texas Transportation Institute—a member of the Texas A&M University System charged with solving transportation challenges—ranked the Houston-to-Dallas corridor first in terms of the need for a high-speed, intercity passenger rail.

"There is a need for the rail connection between Houston and Dallas-Fort Worth because they are two of the fastest growing regions in the entire country," said Maureen Crocker, executive director of the Gulf Coast Rail District. "The main connector between the two is I-45 North, and there are sections that are extremely congested. If population and demand for those routes keeps going, the airlines won't be able to meet those needs."

According to a report prepared by the Texas Department of Transportation, a train on a Houston to Dallas-Fort Worth connector route would average speeds of 150 miles per hour, with routes running every 15 to 20 minutes.

Funding

As is the case with most major transportation projects in Texas, funding is one of the major roadblocks facing a publicly funded high-speed rail line.

"We don't have a specific pot of money to use for rail projects in Texas," said Jennifer Moczygemba, rail system section director for TxDOT. "Several years ago we had significant pots of money coming from the federal side through the Federal Railroad Administration, because there was \$8 billion given out to states through an application process, so that's where we got money for some of our studies."

Another \$2.5 billion was allocated the next year, but nothing else since, which means TxDOT is uncertain as to what funding will be like going forward.

"However, one thing we're looking at is the potential for public-private partnerships," Moczygemba said. "With some of the studies we are completing, it puts us in a good position to look at the potential for having private partners come in and work with us."

One interested private entity is Texas Central High Speed Rail, an affiliate of the Central Japan Railway Company, which has high-speed rail lines in Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka.

Former Harris County Judge Robert Eckels is the president of Texas Central High Speed Rail. He said their project could be on the ground by 2020 at a cost in the multiple billions of dollars. A trip on a line operated by TCHSR could cost the traveler between \$100 and \$125, he said.

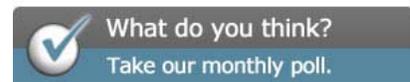
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- The STAAR tests should not be counted as 15 percent of high school students final grade.
- The state should go back to the previous Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test.
- The STAAR test should not be tied into a student's ability to graduate.
- The state should do away with all standardized testing.
- The STAAR testing is necessary to prepare students for college.
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High-speed rail gains steam

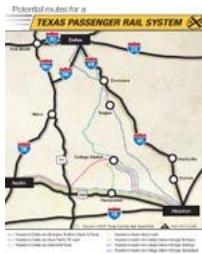
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Eckels said the TCHSR is not seeking public or federal money for their project, but it would consider a public-private partnership with TxDOT.

"It would depend on the role, what conditions would come with the federal funds," Eckels said. "But the rail could be built more quickly and more economically without federal funds. We look for TxDOT to be a creative partner."

Eckels said the project is still in the "very early stages" and that TCHSR is currently analyzing route proposals, environmental issues and engineering studies.

According to Eckels, a market study is also being conducted to determine revenue sources, equity and debt. That study, Eckels said, could be completed by the end of the year.

Proposed routes

Potential routes for a high-speed rail line vary. A TxDOT report suggests a route could use a line owned by the Burlington Northern Santa Fe rail line through Teague.

Another route follows a Union Pacific line along Hwy. 290 through Hempstead and College Station. Or a new line could be constructed on a "greenfield" route that parallels I-45.

"The assumption is that the benefit of using existing right-of-way eliminates having to purchase right-of-way," Crocker said. "It is less expensive, there is some infrastructure in place and you could upgrade. A greenfield route would just be starting from scratch and building a rail line."

Eckels said TCHSR is targeting existing infrastructure, including rail lines and right-of-ways for their project. He envisions a private rail as one that could make multiple stops, including one in The Woodlands.

"I would anticipate within the Houston region you would have two or three [passenger] collector stops," Eckels said. "The real interesting part of this project is that the discipline of the market drives our decision-making. [Where potential stops are located depends on] where we can get riders to pay for the system."

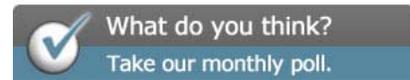
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