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Plano-to-Fort Worth commuter rail project draws interest from private investors



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Published: 31 August 2012 10:50 PM

A private consortium has expressed interest in financing the entire 62-mile Cotton Belt Corridor project, a long-discussed commuter rail line from Plano to Fort Worth, officials said Friday.

Beyond that, little else was released about the potential development for a project that would cost about \$2 billion to build.

Officials with the North Central Texas Council of Governments, which has led efforts to get the Cotton Belt project funded, would not say who is behind the consortium or how any work would be funded.



Council of Governments transportation director Michael Morris said in a letter to leaders of the region's three transit authorities that the consortium signaled its interest in a confidential Aug. 10 letter.

"This letter confirms the keen level of interest within the private sector towards this project," Morris wrote.

The consortium members requested confidentiality, but Tom Shelton, a senior program manager with the Council of Governments, said Friday that members are well-known in the area.

How the massive project would be funded has been a mystery for years because local transit agencies can't afford it. Morris and the Council of Governments have led an "innovative finance initiative" to explore nontraditional funding options.

The initiative focused on private partnerships, reasoning that private investors could earn profits through myriad sources: from advertising and naming rights to municipal tax subsidies and development along the line.

To some following the project, it has always seemed a distant possibility, while Morris and others remained optimistic for a public-private solution unlike any ever tried.

"Professionals out there that do this for a living, so to speak, have validated that, yes, our analysis seems to be correct," Shelton said.

At this point, Shelton said, the potential investors are evaluating the project's viability, but extensive research preceded their letter of intent. The consortium's next step is to submit an unsolicited proposal, which officials expect to receive by the end of the year.

"The model is real simple: Get a private-sector group that comes to the table with not only the expertise to do the project, [but] also ... the financing," said Ron Natinsky, a former chairman of the Regional Transportation Council who now works as a consultant with the private consortium.

How the consortium would govern and subsidize the project "is where the rubber meets the road," DART board member Mark Enoch said Friday at a briefing for Cotton Belt stakeholders.

DART has continuously funded the planning of the project, as the Regional Transportation Council, part of the Council of Governments, set out to make it happen.

