

Private developer interested in building North Texas commuter rail line

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ARLINGTON -- The once unlikely prospect of seeking a private developer to build a 62-mile commuter line connecting Fort Worth to Plano is quickly emerging as a viable alternative, several North Texas officials said Thursday.

One by one on Thursday afternoon, members of the 43-person Regional Transportation Council lined up to sign a nondisclosure agreement to get a peek at an unidentified private developer's letter of intent to build the passenger rail project.

In all, it's an estimated \$1.6 billion effort that would include building the 37-mile TEX Rail project from southwest Fort Worth to Grapevine and DFW Airport -- a task that the Fort Worth Transportation Authority has thus far been unable to complete on its own -- and also extending the commuter line another roughly 25 miles along the old Cotton Belt Line to Addison, Plano and possibly beyond.

The project could ensure that the rail line is built as many as 30 years ahead of schedule, officials said. Although the western portion of the project from Fort Worth to DFW is under federal review and tentatively scheduled to begin service as soon as 2016, the eastern extension of the project has virtually no prospects for tax-supported funding and -- were it not for the private proposal on the RTC's table -- likely wouldn't be built for at least a generation.

The proposal itself will become public around Thanksgiving, and at that time other companies will be encouraged to form teams and submit competing proposals, said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. The region would then select one proposal as the winner.

Elected and appointed leaders from across the region said that, although they hadn't had a chance to go over the details of the confidential information, they were encouraged that it requires relatively little public funding beyond what has already been pledged.

"It sounds too good to be true," Bernice Washington, a Dallas Fort Worth Airport board member who serves on RTC, told Morris.

Meanwhile, although the identities of most companies that make up the development team haven't been publicly disclosed, at least one RTC member said he will no longer be able to take part in deliberations for the Texas Rail/Cotton Belt project because of his involvement. North Richland Hills Mayor Oscar Trevino, owner of O. Trevino Construction in Roanoke, excused himself from discussions on Thursday.

After the RTC meeting, Trevino confirmed by phone that his company, which has experience building street intersections, retaining walls and many other features on rail systems such as Dallas Area Rapid Transit, had agreed within the past 30 days to join a team that is competing to win contracts to design and build portions of the TEX Rail line in Tarrant County.

"Our company is one of many companies on the team," he said in a phone interview.

Last month, an unidentified consortium of companies submitted a confidential proposal to the North Central Texas Council of Governments to pay for much of the project. The deal hinges on allowing the developer to recover its investment through a variety of means -- presumably from the development around train stations, and other nearby land.

Rail car plant

Also, there's a lot of talk about the proposal including creation of a manufacturing plant for the special rail cars that would be used on the line.

Such a manufacturer could provide Texas-made rail cars for the North Texas transit systems and for rail lines and streetcar projects across the state and in other states.

State officials are talking about additional funding sources that may be available to help with the project, which could be of statewide benefit for its creation of permanent jobs at a rail car manufacturing plant, said Bill Meadows of Fort Worth, a member of the Texas Transportation Commission.

At it stands, the RTC has already pledged approximately \$90 million to the TEX Rail project, and could be asked to contribute another \$50 million. Gordon Dickson, 817-390-7796

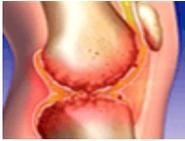
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