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Biden calls Dallas-Houston bullet train beginning of new transportation era in America

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This post has been updated throughout.

Vice President Joe Biden stood atop a sun-drenched rooftop in the Cedars on Wednesday to sing the praises of a planned high-speed rail line between Dallas and Houston. The long-time train commuter said modern transportation infrastructure, such as a high-speed train system, is vital for America to prosper in the 21st Century.

"Folks, you don't even know it yet, but you're going to lead this country into an entirely new era of transportation," Biden told the crowd of about 100 politicians, civic leaders and transportation officials.

His statements make him the highest ranking elected official to publicly portray the privately developed rail line as a watershed American project. Texas Central Partners' plans to tie Dallas and Houston together with 90-minute train rides have garnered wide support in the urban areas it will connect. The project is seen as economic development generator in both regions.

But the bullet train has also attracted deep opposition in rural areas through which the track will run. In several counties between Dallas and Houston, landowners say a private company unfairly has the power to use eminent domain for a project that could at least be partially controlled by foreign interests.

"We don't think there's been any major progress on our main concerns at all," said Kyle Workman, president of Texans Against High-Speed Rail.

The only publicly announced investors in the project so far are Texas companies. But Biden on Wednesday said that he recently met in his office with Japanese investors involved in the rail line. The vice president said an announcement related to that matter is forthcoming.

Texas Central CEO Tim Keith later Wednesday said that the project has garnered a lot of attention.

"We cannot speak to conversations others have had about possible interest in our project," Keith said.

Former Dallas mayor Ron Kirk, who served in the U.S. cabinet shortly after President Obama and Biden were elected, is now a senior advisor on the train project. After Biden's remarks, he said that Texas Central will likely seek federal loans to partially finance the \$10 billion project if such funds are available.

"We will aggressively pursue those," Kirk said.

In Dallas, the high-speed project is seen as a way to better connect downtown Dallas to the burgeoning Cedars neighborhood. The event was held on the roof of the South Side on Lamar building, a former Sears warehouse that developer Jack Matthews turned into a mixed-use building.

The roof looks out over downtown Dallas and the two spots Texas Central is eyeing for a Dallas terminus on the high-speed line. Matthews is spearheading plans to turn the station into a large mixed-use project. Biden and Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings on Wednesday praised Matthews' work.

"Ten to 15 years ago, no one would have imagined we'd be having an event like this in the Cedars," Rawlings said.

The mayor invited Biden to Dallas to discuss the rail project and how infrastructure investments spur economic development and improve quality of life in cities.

"As a leader of a country, you want to shine a light on cities that show the way," Rawlings said.

The Obama administration has seen little success in its push to build high-speed rail networks like those that seamlessly connect major cities in Europe and Asia. Republican governors in Florida and Wisconsin rejected federal funds for such projects in their states. That sent more money to California's voter-approved high-speed rail network, which has been slowed by legal and political battles.

Biden also discussed the state of transportation funding in the U.S. and how highway building can't be the only thing to combat congestion. He said that infrastructure is not about moving people, but improving quality of life and spurring economic development.

The Democratic vice president said that as the Republican party moved farther right and took control of Congress after the 2010 elections, infrastructure spending and rail projects in particular stopped receiving bipartisan support.

"How can you be the leading county in the world with second-rate infrastructure?" he said.

Biden's comments came the same day that lawmakers in Washington D.C. began finalizing the first long-term transportation funding bill in a decade. Legislators face a Dec. 4 deadline to send Obama a bill before federal transportation funding runs out. Congress in recent years have passed dozens of short-term funding fixes while avoiding long-term solutions.

A conference committee is reconciling the differences between Senate and House bills that authorize \$325 billion in transportation spending through 2021. That amount is more than \$150 billion short of what the Obama administration says is needed. Also, Congress has so far only identified funding for the first three years of the period the bill covers.

At a committee hearing Wednesday morning, Republican legislators from Texas said the state's economic prosperity depends on a long-term funding solution.

"Doing nothing represents an unacceptable outcome," said Republican Texas Sen. John Cornyn. *The Associated Press contributed to this report.*

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