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Bullet Train Opponents Reach Out to Japanese Ambassador

by Jamie Lovegrove | Jan. 12, 2016 | 40 Comments



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The Japanese Shinkansen is a high-speed trail used by JR Central in Japan. A private company is planning to build a rail line between Dallas and Houston using the same trains.

East Texas officials sent a letter to the Japanese ambassador to the United States on Monday to express their opposition to a private

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Texas firm's proposed high-speed rail line between Dallas and Houston that has strong ties to a Japanese company.

The letter is the latest effort by opponents of Texas Central Partners' multibillion-dollar project since the firm's 2012 announcement of its plan to bring Japanese train operator JR Central's bullet train technology to Texas. Under the agreement, JR Central would sell its Shinkansen trains to Texas Central and play an advisory role on the system's

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operations. A Japanese-backed government fund has also invested \$40 million in the project.

In the letter to Japanese Ambassador Kenichiro Sasae, local officials argued that the bullet train would burden their communities without providing any benefits and called on Sasae to seek out a different market for the project. The signers of the letter include eleven Republican members of the Legislature: State Sens. Brian Birdwell of Granbury, Lois Kolkhorst of Brenham and Charles Schwertner of Georgetown, and State Reps. Trent Ashby of Lufkin, Cecil Bell of Magnolia, Byron Cook of Corsicana, Kyle Kacal of College Station, Will Metcalf of Conroe, John Raney of College Station, Leighton Schubert of Caldwell, and John Wray of Waxahachie. Other signers include several county judges, county commissioners and members of sub-regional planning commissions in the rural areas that would be most affected by the proposal.

"While we respect your country's ambitious goal of exporting the Shinkansen technology, as residents and leaders in East Texas, we remain opposed to the HSR Project because it will cause irreparable harm to our communities," the officials wrote.

Representatives of the Japanese Embassy were not immediately available for comment.



Texas Central Partners did not directly respond to the contents of the letter, but in a statement, the firm said it remains optimistic about its efforts to draw support for its project from rural communities.

"Texas Central has growing support in the local communities as we continue our outreach through open houses and continued conversations with people," the company said in a statement. "These conversations provided us an opportunity to answer questions and give real time updates."

Texas Central has said it plans to run 62 daily trips between Houston and Dallas. Company officials have described the 240-mile stretch between Dallas and Houston as the

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country's most financially viable prospect for a profitable high-speed rail line.

Despite various obstacles, Texas Central says the project is still scheduled to begin selling tickets in 2021 as it has been all along.

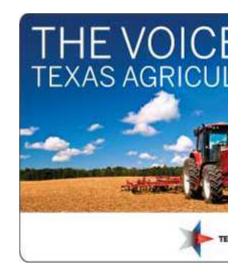
"Our transformational project has attracted global interest connecting two of the nation's largest economic centers with convenient high-speed rail," the company said.

While the plan has drawn support from many officials in Houston and Dallas, officials in the rural communities in between have been consistently hostile to the idea. Among the concerns is that most communities along the expected path would not be able to access the train. Aside from stations in Dallas and Houston, the company is planning only one other station in the Bryan/College Station area. Critics have also questioned whether the project is financially feasible without the kind of public operating subsidies that support many other U.S. mass transit projects. Texas Central has said it has no plans to take public funding to cover the system's operating costs, though it has not ruled out federal loans designed to provide low-interest financing for large transportation projects.

Texans Against High Speed Rail, which spearheaded the letter, touted it as a reflection of "overwhelming local opposition" to the project.

"This project is not just an issue of unwarranted use of eminent domain but also one of eventual taxpayer subsidies that will impact all Texans," said Kyle Workman, the group's president. "Our officials understand the full magnitude of the damage that can be done because of this, and I applaud their fortitude in standing with and for the citizens they represent on this issue."

Given that the partnership between Texas Central and JR Central is a private one that does not directly involve the ambassador, Texans Against High Speed Rail is primarily hoping that Sasae will help facilitate further discussion with all interested parties, according to Judge Ben Leman of Grimes County, one of the signers of the letter.



"We want Japanese officials to know first-hand directly from the elected officials of the state of Texas how we feel about this project," Leman said. "Because there are so many Japanese sources of the funding, we're hoping that not only will the ambassador read it and engage in communication with us directly and the aspects of the Japanese government that we need to speak with, but also engage with the United States government as well."

In the 2015 legislative session, a handful of lawmakers attempted to kill the project by attaching a rider to the budget, but negotiators ultimately eliminated the controversial provision by a narrow vote in the final days before its passage. Statewide officials have mostly avoided taking a stance on the issue.

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