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## ⌚ Clock is ticking on ambitious Cotton Belt Corridor commuter rail plan between Plano, Fort Worth

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A new urgency surrounds a plan to build the \$2 billion Cotton Belt Corridor commuter rail project, in part because the effort hinges on the Legislature's creation of a special district next year to help govern the project.

Talk of developing the 62-mile corridor from Plano to Fort Worth has intensified in recent months, since a private consortium expressed interest to the North Central Texas Council of Governments in financing the project in a way that would allow the entire rail line to be built decades ahead of schedule.

Specifics about the public-private partnership remain murky — especially since the consortium has yet to submit a formal proposal — but the need for the Legislature to approve some form of a municipal management district establishes clear deadlines for getting all the parties on board.

The Legislature convenes in January. Bills must be filed by early March. The session ends in the summer. And barring a special session, the Legislature won't meet again until 2015.

"We really do need to meet the Legislature's timeline to get this done," said Ron Natinsky, a consultant to the private group. "Without the creation of the [special district], along with all the other pieces, the project doesn't happen."

That means local governments and rail agencies, along with the Council of Governments, are scrambling to form the necessary partnerships to expedite the project and make sure the proper steps are taken ahead of the legislative session.

The stakes are high. The Cotton Belt corridor could serve as a route for commuters to get from the outer suburbs north of Dallas to Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport and points beyond in Tarrant County without first having to travel downtown.

The Council of Governments' executive board last week approved a resolution to shepherd early organizational efforts and begin the procurement process. Some of the 13 cities potentially affected by the Cotton Belt line have approved, or are working on, interlocal agreements.

And Dallas Area Rapid Transit, which owns much of the corridor, has been tackling the issue in several meetings and will continue to do so in coming weeks.

"It would've been nice to have all this worked out months ago on the proposal, and then we could be focused on the governance structure," said Michael Morris, the Council of Governments' transportation director. "But we now need to be doing both at the same time."

The accelerated push comes despite a lack of clarity about what the private consortium, which includes construction giants Balfour Beatty and Odebrecht, will identify in the way of revenue sources when it submits its bid in December or January.

Those details remain largely secret, as members of the Council of Governments' Regional Transportation Council signed nondisclosure agreements in September to view the developers' letter of intent to build the Cotton Belt.

But several possible revenue streams for a public-private partnership have been discussed: development around rail stations, tax increment financing and the construction of a rail car manufacturing plant, among others.

Separately, the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, which operates the T, is pursuing federal dollars to fund the Tarrant County portion of the corridor.

And as DART officials discussed the creation of a Legislature-approved special district at two meetings in the last week, there was additional light shed on how some of the financing and development might work:

- The special district, which might also involve creation of a conservation and reclamation district, would likely include the ability to levy taxes, charge impact fees and pursue grants, said Scott Carlson, DART's general counsel.
- The geography of the special district could be similar to a string of pearls, with large areas centered on rail stations, Carlson said.
- Some of the cities might have to contribute property along the corridor to facilitate that setup, said Dean Radeloff, construction director for Odebrecht.

"There are nearly 10,000 acres along the corridor available for development," DART President Gary Thomas said. "That's both for tax and development opportunities."

Getting the Legislature to approve a special district isn't necessarily a huge hurdle, given that the cities involved are expected to be supportive of the measure.

Complicating matters, though, is that the private consortium is helping develop the legislation, even though it's not a guarantee it will be the group selected to handle the project. That means the statute must be written so other groups can participate in a competitive bidding process.

And further, some officials like DART Board Chairman John Danish have bristled at the accelerated timeline, which has a goal of starting rail service as early as

2016.

"The group sat around for 2 1/2 years doing nothing," Danish said at a meeting last week. "Suddenly, they explode in the last four months, and now they want to do something.

"DART is going to do everything we can to cooperate," he continued. "But we do have a responsibility as trustees for due diligence."

Natinsky, a former Dallas City Council member and former chairman of the Regional Transportation Council, said his group understands the need for all parties involved to do the proper vetting, particularly given the complexity of the project. But he and others said the legislative schedule — along with having so many parts already in place — meant time was of the essence.

"The momentum and interest is now," he said. "There's no guarantee as to what will happen in two more years."

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