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Officials wrangle over high-speed rail study

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State and regional leaders are at odds over whether a company that wants to build a 200 mph bullet train from Houston to Dallas should be required to conduct an environmental study that also includes rail stops in Fort Worth and either Arlington or Dallas/Fort Worth Airport.

North Texas leaders say it's crucial that the proposed Texas Central Railway stop not only in downtown Dallas but also in downtown Fort Worth as well as somewhere about midway between the region's two dominant cities. That way, the high-speed rail line can pick up passengers from throughout the Metroplex instead of just the east side.

"I want it to run from Houston to Fort Worth, with a stop in Dallas," Tarrant County Commissioner Gary Fickes said.

But the Japanese-backed company that has proposed building the rail line, Texas Central High-Speed Railway Llc., is proposing to conduct only an environmental study from the outskirts of Houston to downtown Dallas. The Texas Department of Transportation supports that plan and is asking regional planners in Houston and Dallas-Fort Worth to conduct separate environmental studies to figure out how the trains would connect in the inner cities.

In 2011, the state received a \$15 million federal grant to study high-speed rail from Houston to North Texas. State officials argue that if Texas Central Railway can handle the costs of the environmental study along the mostly rural route from suburban Houston to downtown Dallas, then the grant can be spent in the metro areas.

"We're trying to look at the best value - at what is the best way to use the money without being duplicative," Phil Wilson, executive director of the Transportation Department, said Thursday before speaking to the 35W Coalition during an annual meeting in far north Fort Worth.

But many North Texas leaders disagree. Members of the Regional Transportation Council agreed more than a year ago that if a 200-mph train system can be built in the area, it must include at least three stations.

Splitting the project into separate environmental studies violates the spirit of that agreement, they said.

"Recent travel demand analysis conducted by Texas Central Railway confirms that passengers traveling from Houston are destined to all three of the North Texas stations at downtown Dallas, Arlington/DFW Airport and downtown Fort Worth," Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, wrote in a Jan. 4 letter to Wilson. "TxDOT's proposal for separate environmental documents developed independently by the public sector and private sector for the connecting facilities jeopardizes this three-station concept policy and does not serve our region's transportation needs as defined in our long range transportation plan."

Texas Central Railway director Travis Kelly said the disagreement can be worked out and won't slow the project. He said all the parties involved were talking through the best way to handle the environmental work.

"We think serving Fort Worth would be terrific and would pick up a lot of riders," Kelly said. But he said, "There is also additional right-of-way cost." The company, which is backed by the firm that built the world-renowned Central Japan Railway Co., is seeking roughly \$10 billion in private investment to open Texas high-speed rail by 2020.

The group says it won't ask for state or federal funding, though North Texas officials are learning that extending the service into inner cities will cost more than the private sector is willing to put in.

Texas Central Railway envisions that most train riders would drive to the stations, at least in initial years. They would board in Dallas and arrive in Houston about 90 minutes later.

But in major metro areas such as Dallas-Fort Worth, regional planners say the bullet trains need to connect the central business districts, so that users can access the system by bus, commuter rail or other local means.

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