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Station locations may determine high-speed rail's future in North Texas

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ARLINGTON - The fate of a proposal to build a high-speed rail line connecting Dallas-Fort Worth to Houston may rest on whether North Texas leaders can agree on where to put a station.

The Regional Transportation Council about two years ago adopted a policy stating that if an entity wants to bring bullet trains to the region, there should be three stations -- one in downtown Fort Worth, one in either Arlington or the CentrePort area near DFW Airport, and another in downtown Dallas.

But in recent weeks word has begun to spread that a group known as Texas Central High-Speed Railway Llc., which is collaborating with Central Japan Railway Co. to bring high-speed rail to the region, wants to open only one station on North Texas' outskirts, in southeast Dallas County.

Five state senators responded by sending a letter to the Texas Department of Transportation urging Executive Director Phil Wilson to "facilitate" the location of that station at DFW Airport.

Running high-speed rail lines along the Texas 360 corridor and placing a station near DFW terminals A and B is the best way to ensure that trains traveling at 220 mph or more can serve the Metroplex without depending on freight railroad right of way, according to the letter.

"Without such a policy, TxDot may squander the great opportunity with which high-speed rail presents the state," the letter says. It was signed by Republican Sens. John Carona of Dallas, Jane Nelson of Flower Mound, Kelly Hancock of North Richland Hills, Robert Deuell of Greenville and Ken Paxton of McKinney.

"This decision is a one-hundred-year decision," the letter concludes, "and we must get it right."

DFW station

Wilson has asked North Texas leaders to help the state agency come up with a response, said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. So, over the next few weeks the council of governments' rail committee will likely revisit the three-station concept.

Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley noted that the original concept pitched by Texas Central Railway was to open the high-speed rail line to Houston, which is expected to cost roughly \$10 billion, by 2020. But the issue of where to build a station needs to be resolved quickly if the railway is expected to keep that schedule.

"We can't be in listening mode much longer. The private sector is doing their engineering plans," Whitley said.

The three-station concept was conceived as a way to ensure that Fort Worth, Arlington and other cities outside Dallas weren't overlooked. But regional officials are now pondering that, if the railway doesn't want to serve all three areas and the public sector lacks the funds to help pay for the project, the next best solution might be to have the high-speed rail line arrive on middle ground at DFW Airport.

There is even talk of the state Transportation Department making available whatever right of way is needed in the Texas 360 corridor.

'As big as it gets'

Although several RTC officials mentioned southeast Dallas as the desirable destination for Texas Central Railway, the company hasn't publicly disclosed where it would like to build a station, director Travis Kelly said.

Kelly said his company was willing to work with regional leaders about a station location, but "every inch of our track has to be justified."

No one spoke in favor of the single Dallas station at Thursday's RTC meeting in Arlington, but in the past Dallas leaders have indicated the obvious -- that they would be satisfied with a single high-speed rail stop in Dallas.

Meanwhile, Fort Worth leaders have vigorously argued for a high-speed rail plan that serves all areas.

Because of that tension, DFW Airport hasn't taken an official position on high-speed rail. The airport is jointly owned by the two cities and governed by a board with seven members from Dallas and four from Fort Worth.

Bernice Washington, who represents DFW Airport, drew laughs when she told fellow RTC members that her organization "favors world peace."

"We have two owners -- Dallas and Fort Worth -- and until there is consensus between our mama and our daddy we're not going to say much of anything," she quipped. "But we're on the right track. We are gathering the data. We're going to have to live with this for 50 to 100 years, whatever decision we make. This is going to affect everything in North Texas. This is as big as it gets."

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