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## Fort Worth, T officials work on master rail plan

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When Fort Worth officials fired the city's transit board members last month, the short-term goal was to get the TEX Rail commuter rail project back on track to meet its scheduled 2016 opening.

But they also have a long-term goal -- to create a master plan that spells out what other rail lines can be developed for passenger service in surrounding areas.

The city's passenger rail working group is creating a master plan -- a long-range document the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, the T, has lacked for much of its 30-year history.

If the effort is successful, passenger trains could be running to places such as southeast Fort Worth and the AllianceTexas area of far north Fort Worth within 10 to 20 years, or perhaps sooner. Tens of thousands of North Texans would then have new options for getting where they need to go, without having to drive alone in a car.

The master plan could also kick-start other projects, including passenger rail to serve Fort Worth's West Seventh Street, as well as places such as Cleburne and Denton.

"What is the master plan?" Fort Worth Councilman Jungus Jordan, who is chairing the group, said during a council and T meeting last week. "What are the priorities that we can commit to the citizens in our region in and Fort Worth? It says, 'This is what we're building today, but we're going to get to your community in the very near future.'"

The passenger rail working group will hold its next monthly meeting Wednesday in downtown Fort Worth.

Its first order of business is to collaborate with the newly appointed nine-member board of the Transportation Authority and get TEX Rail open from downtown Fort Worth to the north end of Dallas/Fort Worth Airport by 2016. The T has been studying the entire 37-mile TEX Rail route from southwest Fort Worth to DFW since 2005.

Although supporters are optimistic that the northern half of the project can be opened by 2016, the portion south of downtown Fort Worth may have to be built later because of funding restrictions and the prolonged negotiations with Fort Worth & Western Railroad over the right to use tracks in that area.

On the northern end of the project, Grapevine is contributing a 3/8-cent sales tax to the TEX Rail project in return for two train stations in its city limits, and Haltom City and North Richland Hills are also exploring funding options to open their own train stations on the line.

Rob Harmon, the T's TEX Rail project manager, has outlined an ambitious timeline for getting it up and running by the fourth quarter of 2016. The timeline hinges upon the T's ability to get permission from the Federal Transit Administration to enter into the final design phase and order rail cars by the end of this year and to receive a full-funding grant agreement from the federal agency by September 2014.

Meanwhile, the city's rail working group is taking steps to map out a broader future for the T, which hasn't had a reputation for long-term planning. The T co-owns the Trinity Railway Express, along with Dallas Area Rapid Transit. Also, in 2005, T President Dick Ruddell crafted the agency's first strategic plan, which mapped out somewhat long-term goals in approximately five-year increments.

But what Jordan and others want is a master plan that extends the T's reach boldly to areas of the Metroplex with large population and job centers but few public transportation choices.

Those leaders think it's realistic to extend commuter rail to the AllianceTexas area -- most likely using a Burlington Northern rail line that runs roughly parallel to Farm Road 156 between downtown, Texas Motor Speedway and possibly as far north as Sanger -- in less than 10 years.

That group also wants to simultaneously lay the groundwork for commuter rail serving southeast Fort Worth, Mansfield and possibly Midlothian along existing freight lines.

And the group is taking seriously the effort to bring high-speed rail to the region. Of particular interest is a proposal to build a special line for "bullet trains" capable of traveling 200 mph along the Interstate 30 corridor -- connecting downtown Fort Worth to Arlington and Dallas, with a possible connection to CentrePort on the south end of DFW Airport as well.

Also, a handful of other potential passenger rail lines hold promise, Jordan said.

Other commuter rail options could be available along freight lines to:

Cleburne, on tracks roughly parallel to Crowley Road and Texas 174.

Denton, parallel to U.S. 377.

Decatur, on tracks along U.S. 287.

Weatherford, along a Union Pacific Railroad line.

Granbury, on a Fort Worth & Western line.

One other option is to create passenger rail to Azle, somewhere in the Texas 199 corridor.

Fort Worth's population, now an estimated 760,000, is expected to peak at 1.2 million by 2040, Mayor Betsy Price said.

"A comprehensive regional rail system will be a legacy of our generation of our council, and you as T board members," Price said last month during a meeting of the City Council and the T board. "It's the equivalent to DFW Airport, or when the I-30 turnpike came in. It's that important. Mobility will make or break us."

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