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Obama's transportation budget includes \$50mil for Fort Worth TEX Rail project



@gdickson (Updated 10 p.m.)

TEX Rail, a proposed commuter rail line from downtown Fort Worth to Grapevine and the north entrance to Dallas/Fort Worth Airport will be awarded \$50 million in a package of federal projects to be announced Wednesday, officials said. "This is a true reflection of our partnership with the Federal Transit Administration and the diligent work of the T's staff," said Scott Mahaffey, chairman of the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, also known as the T. "This is an important partnership milestone for the region."

The money is far from all that's needed to complete the estimated \$810 million TEX Rail project. But it's a strong sign that the T's request for the federal government to eventually pay up to half the full cost is at least getting serious consideration in Washington. The funding is part of President Obama's proposal to spend \$302 billion on transportation during the next four years, including \$2.5 billion on new rail and other transit projects across the nation. Details of the plan will be discussed during a conference call by Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx on Wednesday.

The T has requested a federal "new-starts" transit grant of roughly \$405 million. Critics are skeptical the Fort Worth project will qualify for such a large grant, given that dozens of cities across the United States are competing for the same pot of federal funds — including many places with passenger rail projects that are further along in the planning process.

However, the TEX Rail project was one of just seven new-starts projects recommended to begin receiving some level of funding in the package. In addition to TEX Rail, projects in Los Angeles, Orlando, Fla., Cambridge, Mass, Portland, Ore., and two projects in the Baltimore area are slated to receive a combined \$578 million.

The lion's share of the federal funding package for transit improvements, \$1.4 billion, was pegged for a handful of big-dollar projects that are already underway. Those projects already have what's known as a full-funding agreement - or a commitment from the federal government that that will be funded to completion - and they include rail and other transit operations in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, Charlotte, N.C., and New York.

"The majority of the projects are fixed guideway transit projects, meaning they use or occupy a separate right-of-way such as rails, 'catenaries' or exclusive bus lanes," read the annual report on funding recommendations, which was prepared by the Federal Transit Administration. This includes rapid rail, light rail, streetcar, commuter rail, and bus rapid transit. The program has helped to make possible dozens of new or extended transit systems across the country. These public transportation investments, in turn, have improved the mobility and quality of life of millions of Americans, provided alternatives to congested roadways and fostered the development of more economically vibrant communities."



The TEX Rail project has been discussed in North Texas for more than a decade, and many elected officials have expressed concern that the T isn't moving fast enough. A little more than a year ago, Fort Worth's City Council replaced eight of nine T board members, saying they wanted to bring in new blood to speed up TEX Rail. Tarrant County followed suit by replacing the T's ninth board member.

A year later, the new members of the T board still haven't been able to sign agreements with the railroads that own the right-of-way TEX Rail would use — Dallas Area Rapid Transit, Union Pacific Railroad and Fort Worth & Western Railroad. Also, a former Trinity Railway Express maintenance officer has gone public with concerns about the use of lighter rail cars for TEX Rail — cars that are known to have trouble making the electrical connection necessary to trigger crossing lights and gates and to help dispatchers track their whereabouts by computer.

Those problems aside, the T has completed several years worth of work on its environmental study for TEX Rail, and hopes to get a "record of decision" from the Federal Transit Administration within the next couple of months. A record of decision on the environmental plans would allow the T to begin final design of stations and new track work, and to begin purchasing rail cars, which take about two years from order to delivery.

The \$50 million that will be announced Wednesday would be available Oct. 1, the beginning of the 2015 fiscal year. The timing of the announcement would seem to indicate that the money would be available for the T to spend on TEX Rail final design and engineering, but T spokeswoman Joan Hunter said Tuesday night that officials had just learned of the funding and didn't yet have details about how it could be spent.

The local half of the TEX Rail project would be funded from a combination of sources, T chief financial officer Rob Harmon said. It would include roughly \$200 million in sales tax contributions from Fort Worth and Grapevine, \$120 million in state funds, \$60 million in other unspecified federal grants and \$20 million from Tarrant County.

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