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## Cotton Belt rail project dealt a serious blow

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Plans to develop a 62-mile Cotton Belt commuter rail line were dealt a serious blow when the Fort Worth City Council this week rejected a resolution supporting the project.

The rejection raises questions about whether supporters of the ambitious plan to build a rail line from southwest Fort Worth to DFW Airport and either Plano or Richardson can manage to get a bill through the current legislative session. A bill would be needed to make it legal to create a special tax district in 13 cities and three counties to help pay for the project, but the state's filing deadline for non-emergency bills is Friday.

Still, some Fort Worth officials say rejecting the Cotton Belt plan, at least for now, is actually the quickest way to ensure the Tarrant County portion of the project -- a 37-mile route known as TEX Rail -- gets built by 2016.

The TEX Rail project has been a work in progress since 2005, and the Fort Worth Transportation Authority currently has an application on file with the Federal Transit Administration to pay for up to half the estimated \$1 billion cost.

But it was confusing for the public -- not to mention elected public officials -- that the Cotton Belt and TEX Rail projects were being planned simultaneously on mostly the same existing rail lines, said Fort Worth City Councilman Jungus Jordan. That confusion could have caused further delays in the TEX Rail project, and there were questions among Fort Worth leaders about whether the special tax district was even needed.

"It would have muddied up the TEX Rail project," Jordan said Wednesday morning, just before a Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition meeting began. "There's nothing in there (the Cotton Belt plan) that we can't do on our own with special tax districts ..."

### Message sent

Those following the Cotton Belt project had said they expected a bill to be filed by local senators. But one lawmaker often mentioned as a candidate to author the bill, state Sen. Wendy Davis, D-Fort Worth, said last month she was waiting to hear from all the cities along the line to ensure the project had local support.

Fort Worth's action Tuesday night would seem to give Davis and others the answer they needed.

The vote in Fort Worth was 6-2-1, with Mayor Betsy Price absent. Councilmen Joel Burns and Danny Scarth voted against Jordan's motion to reject the Cotton Belt support.

The Cotton Belt corridor is expected to take at least \$2.7 billion to develop. An unidentified team of companies has notified the North Central Texas Council of Governments that they wish to develop the line, using property values and station development along the corridor to repay their investment.

The Cotton Belt project would encompass everything in the TEX Rail line, plus an additional 25 miles to the northeast to Plano or Richardson. The project would connect Metroplex neighborhoods such as Fort Worth's Texas Christian University, Grapevine's historical Main Street and Dallas County's Addison Circle.

### Looking ahead

Proponents of the Cotton Belt project said Wednesday afternoon they were gauging what to do next.

"We're kind of surprised by that action," Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said of Fort Worth's vote. "We're going to figure out what their concerns are and make sure everyone understands the same information."

Ron Natinsky, a former Dallas councilman now working with the consulting firm Balfour and Odebrecht as a team member of the Cotton Belt project said it was his group's intention that the bill be written in a way that protected cities' jurisdiction over their property. Some officials in Fort Worth and Grapevine had expressed concerns that if they agreed to the creation of a special tax district covering 13 cities they would be ceding local control.

"We think the language is very clear that in no way are we taking powers away from cities," Natinsky said. "In the end, the cities are going

to have the authority over TIFs or other mechanics within their jurisdictions. Our focus is on building the rail line, operating it and doing the financing to make it a viable project."

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