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Star-Telegram

Place of high-speed rail stations debated

Posted Saturday, Apr. 06, 2013

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DALLAS -- Mark Sullivan wonders who in the world would build a high-speed rail station in southeast Dallas.

"It's not the greatest neighborhood," said Sullivan, a salesman at an ATC Freightliner truck dealership near Interstate 20 and Bonnie View Road, not far from where Dallas bleeds into the smaller Lancaster, Hudgins and Wilmer. It's one of the few areas of Dallas that isn't built out, and though it sports a fair amount of natural greenery, it's not far from some of the city's roughest streets.

But unlikely as it may seem, this area has become a flashpoint in the Dallas-Fort Worth region's debate over where bullet trains traveling 220 mph or more ought to be allowed to pick up and drop off riders.

During two years of debate over where to build high-speed rail stations, leaders from across North Texas say, they have been led to believe that whatever plan was approved would involve construction of three -- one in downtown Dallas, one somewhere in the middle of the region (possibly Arlington or near Dallas/Fort Worth Airport) and one in downtown Fort Worth.

But officials at the Regional Transportation Council said during a recent meeting that a private team that includes Central Japan Railway -- a group that has offered to begin service from Dallas to Houston by 2020, with no public funds -- is not necessarily interested in connecting with the downtown districts. Instead, it wants to connect suburb to suburb, several officials briefed on the project say.

One option under study for high-speed rail service is a railroad track known as the Teague line, which is owned by Fort Worth-based BNSF Railway Co. and runs roughly parallel to Interstate 45 through southeast Dallas on its way to the city's downtown. The Teague line is a few miles from the area of southeast Dallas where officials plan to build a championship golf course and possibly lure the annual Byron Nelson tournament.

By connecting areas outside the population centers, the private team operating as Texas Central High Speed Railway Llc., which is collaborating with Central Japan Railway on the technology it wants to use on the line, can control parking and station-related development. Those elements help make the venture profitable, so public dollars aren't needed, RTC members said.

But many Fort Worth leaders, who for two years have said they prefer to have the region's first leg of high-speed rail terminate at the centrally located DFW Airport, are concerned they will be left off the bullet train grid entirely.

"When you put it at DFW Airport, you put it in the middle of the Metroplex, where we've put \$10 billion or more building highways, the DFW Connector, North Tarrant Express, Sam Rayburn Tollway. The support infrastructure is already in place," said Tarrant County Commissioner Gary Fickes, chairman of the advocacy group Texas High Speed Rail and Transportation Corp. "It's at the center of 7 million people, and that's a whole lot better than being out on the fringe."

But the company, willing to put up its own money for the service, may not be interested in connecting to the public transportation network.

Even so, the company does want to work with regional leaders to help the Dallas-to-Houston line fit in with the region's vision, which includes three stations, said Travis Kelly, Texas Central High Speed Railway director.

"We want to be consistent with regional policy, but at the same time, we think that most people are going to drive their cars to the station, at least in the initial years," Kelly said.

Kelly stressed that his group isn't ready to disclose details of its plan, including possible station locations. And he said the group wants to find locations that are acceptable to business and elected leaders.

A federal environmental review of the Dallas-to-Houston corridor is under way, and Texas Central Railway officials have said they were seeking up to \$10 billion in investments to build the line.

On Thursday morning, the North Central Texas Council of Governments is scheduled to hold a committee meeting in Arlington, where officials will provide updates on possible station locations. The get-together will take place at 11 a.m. before the regularly scheduled Regional Transportation Council meeting.

Trains vs. planes

So does it make sense for a business to build high-speed rail in southeast Dallas, a low-income area where few prospective customers

live?

Perhaps not at first blush. But two University of Texas at Arlington researchers say it's helpful to think about Dallas Love Field, an airport that has survived for decades in the shadow of the much larger DFW Airport by offering customers an alternative for short-haul trips to such cities as Houston and Austin.

In October 2014, the Wright Amendment, which restricts flights at Love Field, will expire, and those researchers believe that Southwest Airlines and maybe other providers will begin offering more long-distance trips out of Love Field -- to destinations such as Los Angeles and New York.

Southwest declined to discuss its plans, spokesman Chris Mainz said.

But if Southwest changes its approach, the UT Arlington researchers say, it could mean fewer flights to in-state cities such as Houston -- creating a demand that can be filled by high-speed rail, even if customers must drive to southeast Dallas to catch a train.

Although airlines fought efforts to build high-speed rail in Texas as far back as the 1980s, they are less likely to oppose bullet trains today because the aviation business model is changing in favor of longer-distance flights, said UT Arlington researchers Stephen Mattingly and Antonio Massidda.

Mattingly, a civil engineering professor, and Massidda, a faculty researcher, have spent two years analyzing the impact of high-speed rail on aviation in Europe -- and the impact of Amtrak's Acela Express train service on aviation in the Northeastern United States.

They say that in areas where train rides last two hours or less, high-speed rail can capture up to 90 percent of aviation's city-to-city business.

Conservatively, they say, even if a high-speed rail connection from Dallas to Houston captured only 60 percent of market share, that would amount to 1.6 million passengers per year.

"Over time, as passengers get accustomed to this service, the market share will likely reach the same levels observed elsewhere as long as the station access time is the same or less than the competing airports," Mattingly said.

However, the UT Arlington researchers stressed that connecting high-speed rail to DFW Airport would be the best way to maximize train ridership and would also enable railways and airlines to work together on schedules and combine ticket sales.

"The introduction of high-speed rail in Texas should be planned by taking into account the aviation system," Mattingly said.

But not everyone agrees that high-speed rail is the answer. Michael Boyd, a Colorado-based aviation consultant, said other factors are signaling a decline in short city-to-city routes, including economic conditions and the availability of technology that makes it possible for workers to do more tasks at home rather than travel.

Also, he said Texans haven't yet thought through the "political issues," such as how many intermediate stops to allow for a train.

"You think for one minute that the fine folks in Corsicana, or Huntsville or Buffalo and their elected officials will sit back and be happy to see this contraption race by? No, they are going to want the train to stop and pick up all six people who would use it," Boyd said.

"The time and distance to slow and stop a 200-mph train and then get up to speed again will torpedo the alleged time savings," he added.

Wright debate, again

Among those who believe that high-speed rail is in Texas' future, a rift has emerged that reminds some of the years-long battle between Fort Worth and Dallas over the Wright Amendment. The possibility of a political rift has caught the attention of the Fort Worth and Dallas mayors, who said they want to work it out.

"I'm looking for a major piece of research that looks at who is likely to use it, what they want to use it for and what the pricing scenario is," Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings said. "My itch is: 'Who's going to use this? Do they want to go to Dallas? Houston? Is this a businessperson? Is this a leisure traveler?' I want to make sure the customers of Dallas-Fort Worth get a voice at this table."

Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price said she plans to broach the issue informally with Rawlings at one of their upcoming get-togethers.

Price's general belief is that high-speed rail should be "accessible to everyone in the whole region."

"It should serve the center of the Metroplex ...," she said. "We're talking in conceptual plans right now. It's a very complex issue. This could potentially be as big of an issue as the formation of DFW Airport."

"I think people for a long time thought high-speed rail was some kind of pipe dream," she added, "and now it has grown legs."

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4/8/13

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