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Cotton Belt funding bill dies in Legislature

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It was a grand plan to build a 62-mile commuter rail line cutting diagonally across North Texas, from southwest Fort Worth to DFW Airport and Plano.

Perhaps too grand.

A proposal to use private investment to build the entire 62-mile Cotton Belt project likely is dead in its current form, after a bill filed during the state legislative session never made it out of committee, an official said.

But the news isn't all bad, as officials say they may actually have more success building the line as two separate projects — one for the Fort Worth area, and another for greater Dallas.

On the west side, the 37-mile portion of the Cotton Belt project connecting Fort Worth to DFW — better known in Tarrant County as TEX Rail — is on track to be built by 2016. On the east side, it's the remaining 25-mile portion of the Cotton Belt north and east of the airport — extending to cities such as Coppell, Addison, Richardson and Plano — that faces a less certain future.

"Clearly, the Cotton Belt is back to being two different projects," said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments. "On the west, we'll proceed with TEX Rail, and the east side they will do the best they can. The notion of putting them together and creating a system approach and building both parts at the same time, since the legislation didn't pass, we will most likely not be getting a proposal."

Concerns raised

Last year, a group of mostly unidentified developers that included construction firms Balfour Beatty and Odebrecht told the council of governments they would be submitting a proposal to build the entire 62-mile Cotton Belt corridor, using outside funds.

It was cheered as an alternative form of financing for the project, which was estimated to cost \$2.7 billion.

But the proposal was never actually submitted, and as the legislative session drew near officials in cities such as Grapevine and Fort Worth began to raise concerns about the implications of turning over control of public rail lines to a corporate partner, or an entity with taxing authority stretching across multiple cities and counties.

TEX Rail supporters also worried that their project would be delayed beyond its projected 2016 opening if it was folded into a larger, regional Cotton Belt plan.

Now, without outside financial help, Dallas Area Rapid Transit officials say they can't afford to build the eastern 25 miles of the Cotton Belt line for at least two decades. But there is still a chance that the private sector may step in and make a proposal, perhaps one that focuses on the eastern side of the Metroplex.

The developers are still interested in paying for some of the Cotton Belt project, and haven't given up on submitting a Cotton Belt proposal, said Ron Natinsky, a former Dallas councilman who represents the group.

"We're continuing to vet our various options," Natinsky said. "The overall perspective of the proposal remains the same — the capture of value, the costs."

Fort Worth officials said the death of the Cotton Belt bill, which was filed by state Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas but didn't get out of committee, will have no negative effect on their efforts to develop the western portion of the line.

The Fort Worth Transportation Authority is applying for a federal new-start transit grant to cover up to half the roughly \$1 billion to develop its portion of the line — known as TEX Rail — which would stretch from DFW Airport west and south to Grapevine, the Stockyards, Texas Christian University and the southwestern edge of Tarrant County. TEX Rail is scheduled to open in 2016, if the project receives funding.

Phased approach

The Fort Worth City Council is now solidly behind the effort to build TEX Rail. It was the Fort Worth council's opposition to the secretive Cotton Belt financing plan — as well as opposition from Grapevine — that created enough skepticism in the Legislature to prevent the bill

from getting out of committee.

“Some local officials just don’t feel comfortable with the amount of information they have,” said Vic Suhm, executive director of the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition. “

Suhm predicted that if the TEXRail project can secure a full funding grant agreement from the Federal Transit Administration before the next regular legislative session begins in early 2015, Fort Worth-area elected leaders might feel more comfortable exploring alternative options for building the Cotton Belt extension into Plano.

The bill would have allowed creation of a special tax district in many of the 13 cities and three counties along the Cotton Belt line. The measure would have potentially helped cities such as Haltom City, which want a train station along the Cotton Belt line but currently lack the capacity to raise their sales tax rate.

However, officials in several cities, including Grapevine and Fort Worth, raised concerns that such a special tax district would undermine control of zoning and taxing within their own municipal boundaries.

Now that the bill has died, efforts on the east side of the Cotton Belt project could turn toward building the rail line in a phased approach, Morris said.

One option would be just to build a few miles of the Cotton Belt line from Addison to Carrollton, providing Addison residents a rail connection to DART’s green line as well as the Denton County Transportation Authority’s A-train.

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