

Star-Telegram Honkin' Mad Blog
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[With high-speed rail and freight congestion on tap, new rail director arrives in Texas](#)

ARLINGTON A Georgia man who helped develop that state's first coordinated rail plan has been hired as the new rail director for the Texas Department of Transportation.

Erik Steavens, 42, arrives as Texas seeks to build high-speed rail from the Dallas-Fort Worth area to Houston. The trains are capable of going 220 mph and building the rail line from Houston to Dallas is expected to cost at least \$10 billion. As only the state's second rail director, Steavens also will represent the state's interests in working with freight railroads to improve congestion at crossings in populated metro areas, including the Tower 55 project near downtown Fort Worth, and to expand the state's ability to handle multimodal freight such as shipments arriving at the state's gulf ports from the Panama Canal.

Steavens' resume on the LinkedIn website says he is "able to achieve results others believe to be impossible." But when asked tongue-in-cheek on Wednesday whether that means he can bring high-speed rail to North Texas, Steavens said his main mission for the moment is to talk to state and local leaders and make sure he understands their goals and desires for both passenger and freight rail.

"Right now I'm in a big ingesting period," he said. "Part of the process for me is learning what rail and what it does in the state. I'm getting together with people and trying to meet and learn."

Phil Wilson, the transportation department's executive director, confirmed Steavens' hiring last week. Steavens arrives after a multifaceted career in Georgia. Steavens most recently worked as president of TIP Consultants LLC, a transportation planning firm. He also worked at the Georgia Department of Transportation, where he oversaw non-highway programs such as aviation, waterways and rail.

Steavens was in charge of developing Georgia's first coordinated rail plan and at one point looked at a high-speed rail projects in that state, including a loop to link Atlanta, Athens, Augusta, Savannah and Macon, according to the Atlanta Business Chronicle.

Wilson stressed that although he welcomed Steavens' expertise in rail, the state agency's role in bringing bullet trains to the Metroplex is secondary to that of the private sector, and to local Dallas-Fort Worth officials. "Our primary role is to facilitate the conversation," Wilson said. "Our job is to facilitate the environmental document so that if funding is identified to build high-speed rail from Dallas to Fort Worth the environmental document is cleared."

Optimistic outlook

In North Texas, officials are increasingly optimistic they can find a way to make high-speed rail work — and possibly connect Dallas to Fort Worth with trains capable of traveling 220 mph, making it possible to go between Dallas and Fort Worth, possibly with a stop at either Arlington or DFW Airport, in about 19 minutes. Multiple studies are underway. Texas Central Railway, a company partnering with Central Japan Railway has proposed building a bullet train from Houston to Dallas by 2021, using no federal funding. However, that plan initially included only a stop in Dallas, several officials briefed on the matter have said. However, North Texas officials say the region's policy is that whatever form of high-speed rail comes to the region must stop in at least three areas — Dallas, Fort Worth and somewhere in the Arlington-DFW Airport area. So the North Central Texas Council of Governments is working on a plan to take the Texas Central Railway's plan and extend it into the inner city.

Pricey connections

Michael Morris, council of governments transportation director, briefed the Fort Worth City Council earlier this month on high speed rail. He said one option under consideration at the moment is for the private sector companies to work with the state transportation department's leadership to focus on getting environmental clearance for the Dallas-to-Houston phase of high-speed rail. Then the federal funds identified for Texas high-speed rail studies could be spent making the more complicated and likely more pricey connections between the developed areas of Dallas and Fort Worth.

"There seems to be a lot of interest and excitement in moving forward," Morris said. "If someone knocks on our door, we need to have the clear mechanics in place for either at-grade rail or high-speed rail."

Relatively small amounts of money are available to study high-speed rail in Texas, but the state did receive \$15 million in federal funds to begin the process in 2011. Also, in 2011 Texas received a \$15 million federal grant to study high-speed rail from Dallas to Houston. Tarrant County Commissioner Gary Fickes and Fort Worth Councilman Jungus Jordan were among the officials who called for a more intensive effort to plan high-speed rail carefully in the region. Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price also chimed in: "This is probably the next project equivalent to DFW Airport," she said. "There are a lot of proposals."

Stevens is the second director of the state transportation department's rail division, which was created in 2009, as many people in the state began to show renewed interest in improving passenger rail service across the state. The first director was Bill Glavin, who retired in July.

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