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High-speed rail hopes

Cautious optimism for Texas rail



] James Nielsen, Staff

Houston Mayor Annise Parker center, speaks as Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings 2nd from left and Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price left, Dallas Mayor Pro Tem Tennell Atkins 2nd from right and Arlington Council Member Kathryn Wilemon Mayor Pro Tem look on during announcement on High Speed Rail between Houston and Dallas / Ft. Worth Thursday, March 27, 2014, in Houston. (James Nielsen / Houston Chronicle)

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An obsolete locomotive sits at the center of Houston's city seal. It is a reminder that our city once sat at the crossroads of dozens of different rail lines, bringing commerce and trade at a time when a heavy rain would turn roads into mud pits. Traffic has replaced thunderstorms as the greatest threat to passable roads, while high-speed rail now stands in for locomotives in the statewide transit dreams of Texas' leaders and politicians.

It all feels a bit back to the future.

The rise of the automobile and modern highways liberated folks from the fixed routes of a rail system. There is something undeniably American about the open road, but ideals of freedom and individuality lose their luster in bumper-to-bumper traffic. It is hard to feel like a great American gadabout when you're just one of 50,000 folks making the same weekly commute between Houston and Dallas. If you think that four-hour drive along Interstate 45 is bad now, the Texas Department of Transportation expects growing traffic to drag driving time to six and a half hours by 2035.

The proposed Texas Central High-Speed Railway promises to make that trip in under two hours - all funded with private dollars. So the mayors of Houston, Dallas and Fort Worth have thrown their weight behind this alternative to the usual commuter routes.

Still, isn't there something outdated about rail? Of course, some environmentalist would say the same about Texas' oil and gas industry. Ours is a state that builds on the past, using technology to bring new life to long-standing industry. Like fracking techniques resurrecting once-abandoned oil fields, high-speed bullet trains can make Texas rail a reality. Any plans will certainly face questions of land acquisition, safety concerns and government regulation - though the private funding should help avoid the usual political fights. But at a time when traffic threatens our state's commerce and quality of life, perhaps that obsolete locomotive isn't so much a relic as a nod to the future.