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Federal nod pushes TEX Rail closer to construction

September 29, 2014

A. Lee Graham

Reporter

TEX Rail appears on track, with a newly announced federal decision allowing officials to begin engineering work for the planned 37-mile commuter rail line.

Giving the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, or The T, what's called a record of decision on Monday were the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

A move, which could allow construction to begin in 2016, signals formal federal approval of TEX Rail's environmental impact statement.

"Achieving a record of decision is an acknowledgement of the importance of TEX Rail in helping to meet the growing public transportation needs in Greater Fort Worth and Tarrant County and to provide essential connections to other transit systems across the North Central Texas region," said Scott Mahaffey, T board chairman, commenting in a news release.

TEX Rail initially will extend from downtown Fort Worth, across northeast Tarrant County and into Grapevine and Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport at Terminal B. The rail line is projected to serve more than 10,000 daily riders using eight stations when service begins in 2018. By 2035, more than 15,500 daily riders are expected to travel in and out of 10 total stations.

The head of the Fort Worth transit agency lauded the decision, calling it great news for a project that's faced several planning delays.

"What this means, specifically, is it allows us to hire an engineering firm to do the final design. That is critical and allows us to get started very quickly," said Paul Ballard, The T president and CEO.

The decision also allows The T to begin acquiring property necessary for stations and other property along the rail corridor.

The next major project milestone is expected after the FTA provides The T with permission to enter engineering, at which point the agency will place its order for rail vehicles, according to Mahaffey.

"We hope to make that award in November or December," Ballard said.

Mahaffey thanked several agencies in supporting the project, including Federal Transit Agency Region VI in Fort Worth, the Federal Aviation Administration Southwest Region in Fort Worth, the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG), and The T's TEX Rail partners: Tarrant County, the City of Fort Worth, the city of Grapevine, and D/FW Airport.

"These supporters, and many other community and state leaders, also were instrumental in TEX Rail's inclusion in the President's 2015 Budget for New Starts funding," he said.

The New Starts process will qualify TEX Rail to eventually receive federal funding for approved expenditures of up to 50 percent of TEX Rail's estimated capital cost.

In March, news broke that the proposed project would receive \$50 million as part of President Barack Obama's fiscal 2015 budget.

That's out of an estimated \$820 million expected to be needed to fulfill the commuter rail vision.

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