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TRTC to develop new public education outreach programs

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Local transportation officials and members of the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition are developing new public education outreach efforts, and also are working to secure funds from a number of sources for various rail projects across North Texas.

Chair of the Coalition Ken Shetter said at the organization's Aug. 5 meeting that the group's public education committee is working on new campaigns to build interest on transportation issues expected to come up in the 2011 state legislative session. Specifically, the coalition is looking to work with area grassroots organizations and social networking Web sites, he said.

The new public education and outreach effort is intended to bolster support for legislative issues the coalition lobbied for through the 2009 session but did not pass the legislature, including the Texas Local Option Transportation Act. By starting outreach efforts this year, the coalition will have a time advantage in educating the public well before the 2011 session rolls around, Shetter said.

"Every day we go [and] we do not move forward, we diminish that advantage, and we're definitely going to hit the ground running," Shetter said at the meeting.

Among the rail projects up for funding, from sources such as grants and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, are at-grade improvements to the congested Tower 55 rail yard at the intersection of Interstate 30 and Interstate 35-W. State transportation officials are vying for \$70 million in grant funds to help fund the construction of 9,000 new line feet of rail road tracks moving north and south of Tower 55.

The at-grade improvements are expected to increase travel time through the rail yard by about 40 percent, said Vic Suhm, executive director of the coalition.

Other projects include various Texas-based sections of a nationwide, high-speed rail network that would link Texas to other states, and position Fort Worth as a hub for high-speed rail travel, said Tom Shelton, a senior transportation planner with the North Central Texas Council of Governments.