

## YOUR COMMUTE

# Regional council to seek out private partner for Cotton Belt rail line

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ARLINGTON -- Even as Fort Worth officials work to line up money to launch commuter rail from the city's southwest side to [Dallas/Fort Worth Airport](#), a regional planning body has stepped in to seek out a private partner and speed up development all the way to Plano.

On Thursday, the Regional Transportation Council unanimously agreed to find a developer to bring new funding to the project, which likely would cost more than \$1 billion.

The council, a 43-member body that normally serves only in a planning role, will be more actively involved in the Cotton Belt project. Over the next couple of months, the transportation council's staff from the North Central Texas Council of Governments will prepare a request for proposals and, assuming that developers bid on the project, will negotiate with them and make a recommendation for area transit agencies to ratify.

The novel idea of bringing private money into a rail project was first discussed by the group last month and approved by the Fort Worth Transportation Authority.

For commuters, college students and other prospective riders, the rail line could connect busy commercial areas on the west and east sides of the Metroplex two decades ahead of schedule. The 60-mile corridor cuts diagonally through North Texas, connecting Fort Worth's medical and downtown districts with the Stockyards, Northeast Tarrant County, D/FW Airport and the north Dallas commercial areas.

"I think we're going to learn a whole bunch, not just about this corridor, but other transportation corridors in the future," said Michael Morris, transportation director for the council of governments. He said that if the project is successful, it could open the gates for many other transportation projects -- perhaps more rail lines or roads -- involving a combination of public agencies and private partners.

"We'll see if the private sector responds to us," he said.

In Tarrant County, the T is already planning a commuter rail line from southwest Fort Worth to Grapevine, with a spur to D/FW Airport's Terminal B. That project, estimated to cost nearly \$600 million, runs along a small portion of the Cotton Belt corridor in Northeast Tarrant County. But it is only partly funded and likely would require a large grant from the Federal Transit Administration, from whom many other metro areas are vying for funding as well.

The T is still hoping to get part of the commuter rail line open by 2013, although the agency is nearly a year behind schedule in submitting its application for federal funds.

Further east, as the rail line stretches from the airport to Coppell, Plano and Wylie, the project is not expected to receive Dallas Area Rapid Transit funding for at least two decades.

But during the past couple of years, political forces in that area have strongly favored seeking a private developer for the project -- much like other Texas agencies have sought outside funds for toll roads.

It's a marked shift from just a few years ago, when there was still vocal opposition to extending passenger service along the Cotton Belt line in north Dallas neighborhoods.

"Now everybody wants the line, and we've got to find the money to build it," said Dallas Councilman Ron Natinsky, vice chairman of the transportation council.

The approval came after Morris assured transportation council members from Dallas and Collin counties that, other than an initial \$3.5 million needed for a consultant to start the Cotton Belt Corridor study, money from other road projects would not be needed.

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The Trinity Railway Express also has plans for the Cotton Belt Line, including a North Richland Hills station at Davis Boulevard.

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