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State officials are optimistic that high-speed rail can work in Texas

Posted Thursday, Aug. 27, 2009

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Efforts to bring high-speed rail to Texas are chugging along.

The Texas Department of Transportation formally applied for \$1.8 billion in stimulus funding this week to improve existing passenger rail service in Fort Worth and other areas and begin planning a world-class system that may someday link cities by 185-mph trains.

Historically, Texans have cast a skeptical eye toward passenger rail, at least during the automobile and aviation eras. In the 1990s, state officials rejected a proposal to build a bullet-train-style system between big cities such as Dallas and Houston.

This time, the key to success will be including smaller cities such as Temple in the early planning, members of the advocacy group Texas High Speed Rail and Transportation Corp. testified Thursday during a Texas Transportation Commission meeting in Austin.

Grassroots support is crucial if state leaders want to avoid a repeat of the Trans-Texas Corridor, a sweeping plan to build toll roads and utility lines across the state that became widely opposed by Texans who feared that too much private land would be seized and that projects would be built with too much foreign involvement. The 7-year-old Trans-Texas Corridor plan was shelved this year.

"One of the lessons we've learned is, we really need to start there at the community level," Transportation Commissioner Bill Meadows of Fort Worth said of the rail plan. "When we start talking about alignment, it has the potential to do great, but it also has the potential for [negative] impact. We really do want to start communicating, and, more than anything else, listening."

If rural interests can be brought aboard, the proposed Texas T-Bone high-speed rail line connecting Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston and San Antonio has the potential to revolutionize how

people live and work, supporters said. Cities such as Waco and Bryan-College Station would suddenly be just a short hop from the state's major metro areas.

For now, the plan is to hire a rail director within the Transportation Department by next month, and take the bureaucratic steps to begin governing the process, said Amadeo Saenz, Transportation Department executive director. One option is to create a corporation within the department that would be equipped to juggle public and private interests.

The state hopes to get either its \$1.8 billion stimulus request or a comparable Federal Railroad Administration grant, he said.

The Transportation Commission also renewed its agreement with Oklahoma to subsidize the Amtrak Heartland Flyer, which offers daily trains from Fort Worth to Oklahoma City. The states split the cost of covering Amtrak's operating losses, and for Texas it will amount to \$1.95 million for the next year. Kansas officials are pushing for the Heartland Flyer to be extended to Kansas City.

Fort Worth is also served daily by the Texas Eagle, which connects San Antonio to Chicago.