

Most federal rail grants probably will bypass Texas

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The federal government is about to hand out a river of cash to states willing to build a network of bullet trains, as the [Obama](#) administration and [Democrats](#) in Congress seek to slowly ease the country's dependence on automobiles and airplanes to make short trips between its biggest cities.

It's the nation's first major investment in true high-speed rail, and among its most significant pushes to locate trains of any kind far from the East Coast.

But while the federal grants won't be announced until later this month, or early February, word already has emerged that Texas' chances of snagging much of what it has requested are slim.

This month, at a speech in Austin, a top federal rail administrator charged with managing the distribution of the new grants said Texas' application lacks the kind of political support from the governor and the Legislature that would help it compete against other states where that support has been stronger.

"There has been no central vision, no common vision for rail in Texas," said Karen Rae, deputy commissioner for the Federal Railroad Administration. "And that kind of vision, that kind of support from the political leadership, is critical to success in our program."

Gov. Rick Perry's spokeswoman said he thinks the department has done the right thing: apply for the planning funds so that Texas can determine whether high-speed rail is feasible.

"This study will tell us the costs, benefits, use, etc. of HSR in the state – all of which are necessary before even deciding to pursue public or private investment in HSR," spokeswoman Allison Castle said in an e-mail.

But Perry isn't holding his breath, she said. "Hope for the best, expect the worst," said Castle, who said Texas is routinely overlooked in federal transportation spending.

The first \$8 billion of what could be several times that much money over the next five years is expected to be awarded in the next several weeks. And Texas, with its flat landscape and bulging urban populations just far enough away from each other to make high-speed rail attractive, is home to two of the eight rail corridors the U.S. government has identified as likely places to invest.

Texas has requested \$1.8 billion in the current round of funding, most of it to fast-track a bullet train proposal – dubbed the Texas T-Bone – that would run trains at 220 mph from Fort Worth to San Antonio, and from Temple to Houston.

Other states

Rae said other states have done much more than Texas has to enhance their funding requests.

"Immediately after we announced this [funding] program, the state of Florida called a special session of its Legislature – and they set about addressing their laws specifically so as to make their application as strong as possible. In the Midwest, eight governors and the mayor of Chicago have formed a formal compact to work together to bring high-speed rail."

Efforts in California to string high-speed trains from San Francisco to San Diego are also much further along than efforts in Texas, despite that state's huge budget problems and other financial woes.

Not long after Texans approved \$5 billion in bonds for highways in 2007, voters in California approved twice that much to advance high-speed rail.

Texas House Transportation Committee Chairman [Joe Pickett](#), D-El Paso, said in an interview in Austin that it's no secret that Texas is unlikely to secure the rail money it wants from the federal government this time around. The best it can hope, he said, is that recent steps by the Legislature and by the [Transportation Department](#) will help make it more competitive when the second round of funding comes along.

Still, those moves have been significant – even if Texas misses out on the flurry of federal rail grants, said Peter LeCody of Dallas, chairman of Texas Rail Advocates.

"At least we're talking about rail now," he said. "That is a huge change."

Texas Rail Advocates will host a southwest regional conference on rail beginning Jan. 28, when Rae will address Texans again about the federal interest in bullet trains.

In the past 12 months, state agencies and the Legislature have raised rail's profile significantly in Texas, where for decades nearly the sole focus of the Texas Department of Transportation has been on building one of the nation's biggest, and for years most admired, networks of highways and bridges.

Last year, the Transportation Department created a new rail division, hiring a longtime rail executive who says his mission is to build a network of fast passenger trains in Texas to ease highway congestion on major corridors like Interstate 35.

"Folks, we have a problem," Bill Glavin, the new rail division director, said in a speech in Austin earlier this month, noting that relentless efforts to add more and bigger highways in Texas haven't avoided near gridlock on its roads. "And as they say, it's insanity to keep doing things the same old way and to expect different results. It is well past time that we add components to our transportation network that will include freight and passenger rail.

"What's the solution? Rail. The big question is funding," he said.

Of course, funding is not just a big question – it may be the only question, especially in a state where its constitution forbids spending any gas taxes on rail.

A proposal put forward late last year by one of the world's leading passenger rail firms would string trains between Fort Worth and San Antonio – though not, initially, to Houston. But it would do so at an eye-popping cost of \$13 billion. That's too much for even the world's biggest private companies to handle without significant government contributions, though rail advocates note that once built, many of the world's most advanced passenger rail lines operate without taxpayer subsidies.

Still, LeCody said he's more optimistic about rail in Texas than he has ever been. Even if the grandest plans remain on the drawing board for years, other, smaller improvements are almost certain to happen more quickly.

Small improvements

Indeed, of the \$1.8 billion Texas has requested in the current round of funding, about \$400 million of it is for far smaller but still potentially significant improvements. Jennifer Moczygemba, who helped prepare the applications for the state transportation department, said most of those improvements would help improve freight rail in Texas, but in ways that will also speed up existing [Amtrak](#) service in the state, which shares rail lines with the private carriers.

For instance, \$3 million would help improve signals along a rail line from Fort Worth to Oklahoma, allowing Amtrak service to maintain speeds of 79 mph, rather than having to slow down in places to 49 mph.

Texas is also seeking about \$30 million to make improvements at Tower 55 in Fort Worth, where multiple rail lines converge, slowing down trains each day. If awarded, the money would speed up Trinity Railway Express commuter trips through the area, she said.

Glavin, whose department has 33 employees, said even small steps will be important as Texas begins seeing rail as a vital part of its transportation planning.

"The mission is evolving as we go forward," he said of the new rail division. "What is important is that TxDOT has made the commitment that there simply has to be a viable alternative to building out the roads as we have always done."

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