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Texas Senate OKs high-speed rail corporation

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AUSTIN – A Texas high-speed rail corporation would be created to begin planning for a 200-mph rail system linking the state's five largest urban areas under legislation that the Senate approved Tuesday.

The measure by Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, would direct the seven-member board of the corporation to plan and develop the rail transit system, using federal funds for the early stages of the project and then seeking private financing for construction.

Senators approved the bill on a 25-4 vote, sending it to the House.

"Texas could see high-speed rail on the ground and operational within a decade," said Carona, who leads the Senate's transportation committee.

Although Texas considered a high-speed rail system – linking Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio and Austin – nearly two decades ago, the idea was dropped because the consortium selected to construct the system was unable to get state funding.

Carona said high-speed rail now appears more viable, thanks to new federal priorities, even though significant state funding is still unlikely.

"The state has grown since then and our population has grown substantially," he said. "In the years to come, air travel is apt to become more expensive, not less, and high-speed rail provides an alternative for our transportation needs."

Another major change from the previous effort is that the system would likely be centered on the major airports in the state, he said.

The project will depend on "creative private capital" as the main source of funding, using such mechanisms as revenue bonds paid off with passenger fares, Carona said.