

# Texans in Congress push for big-ticket transit projects

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WASHINGTON – As a House committee prepares to craft new highway legislation, some Texas lawmakers are making public transportation and rail service a high priority.

Dallas Democratic Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, the highest-ranking Texan on the House transportation committee, has requested nearly \$2.5 billion for 25 projects. Of those, 12 are transit and rail projects that account for about \$2 billion, while \$500 million is for projects such as road and highway upgrades.

Among Johnson's largest transit project requests are \$593 million to engineer and construct the east-west Cotton Belt Corridor commuter rail line, \$483 million to extend the Irving Corridor to Dallas/Fort Worth Airport, \$440 million for the Dallas central business district light rail alignment, \$300 million for the Texas T-Bone high-speed rail corridor and \$80 million for the first phase of a streetcar system in downtown Dallas.

Johnson said the projects listed on her Web site represent all requests that have been made to her office, and project priorities won't be determined until the committee decides how much money is available.

Still, Johnson said, high-speed rail is important to Texas and the stimulus package includes about \$8 billion for high-speed rail nationwide.

"That is, for Texas, one of the best investments we can make," Johnson said. "Our distances are such that Amtrak is just not fast enough."

The surface transportation legislation, which the committee will consider later this month, is how Congress allocates money for transportation and highway construction over a six-year period. The bill, which could carry a \$450 billion price tag, also gives Congress an opportunity to request funding for specific projects.

Based on new transparency rules, members of Congress were directed to disclose project requests on their Web sites.

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Waco, has requested at least \$660 million in high-priority project funding, with nearly two-thirds going to public transportation or rail projects. He has requested \$350 for a portion of the Texas T-Bone high-speed rail corridor.

But public transportation is not everyone's priority. Rep. Joe Barton, R-Arlington, has submitted nearly \$116 million in project requests, with only \$3 million to be spent on a

public transportation project: the North Arlington Intermodal Transportation Center, which would add a stop on Trinity Railway Express between Dallas and Fort Worth.

A Barton aide said the congressman supports public transportation – particularly in Arlington – but said it's less useful for those who live in places such as Ennis and Waxahachie. Barton's two big-ticket items are a \$53.6 million expansion of the U.S. Highway 287 Ennis bypass and \$42 million to improve Interstate 35E.

Paul Dean, director of government relations at the American Public Transportation Association, said rural communities are ramping up public transit.

Transit's popularity is "not just in large, urbanized areas that are traditional transit cities, but in smaller communities," Dean said. "As public transportation ridership and demand continues to grow, you're starting to see a lot more members of Congress paying attention to transit and its benefits and its positive contributions in those smaller communities."