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Posted on Mon, Jun. 01, 2009

Cities must now look elsewhere for rail funds

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Cities hoping for help from the state in paying for commuter rail service must now reassess plans after Texas lawmakers killed a proposed law that would have allowed local-option elections to raise taxes and fees for transit.

The Fort Worth Transportation Authority, also known as the T, has a service area that only includes about half of Tarrant County's 1.8 million residents. Cities such as Arlington, North Richland Hills and Burleson must now find other ways to connect to the agency's rail network.

In Arlington, elected leaders must now decide whether to ask city voters for permission to raise sales taxes for transit. Arlington has a quarter-cent available, but transit elections in the city have failed three times since 1980.

"Everything is back on the table. We'll look at all the options and do the best we can do," said Arlington Councilwoman Kathryn Wilemon. "A decision will have to be made by the Arlington council."

Barring a sales tax increase for transit in Arlington, Wilemon said, "it just leaves Arlington out of the rail picture, pretty much. There's no funding for that right now."

A quarter-cent would provide enough funding to build a Trinity Railway Express station near Farm to Market 157 in far north Arlington, and extend express bus service from that station to the entertainment district, said T President Dick Ruddell.

Projects continue

Other cities near Fort Worth are in much the same situation.

In Northeast Tarrant County, cities such as North Richland Hills and Haltom City may have to wait many years before building train stations on the proposed southwest to northeast commuter rail line that will cut through their city and is scheduled to have passenger service by 2013. Those cities don't have any room under the state's 8.25 percent sales tax limit, and were hoping for options such as a local gas tax or vehicle registration fee to generate revenue.

But several commuter rail projects already in the planning or construction phases will press on, and that's good news for cities such as Fort Worth and Grapevine, which are combining forces to develop the rail line from southwest Fort Worth to the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport north entrance.

Grapevine voters already agreed to raise their sales tax by .375 cents to pay for commuter rail to their city.

Tough questions

As for the cities that can't afford to join, the T will continue to keep their proposed stations in the master plan, Ruddell said. "It doesn't cost anything to leave them in the plan."

The failure in Austin also won't hurt the efforts of the Denton County Transportation Authority to get its A-train open from Denton to Carrollton by December 2010. The project is already funded, and rail cars have been ordered.

Private investment on the Cotton Belt portion of the southwest to northeast line could improve the financial picture — and Dallas Area Rapid Transit is actively seeking private partners. However, private funding likely would benefit cities such as Addison and Carrollton on the more densely populated North Dallas segment, Ruddell said.

County officials may now look at their options. In Tarrant County, officials in 2006 passed a \$433 million bond package for roads.

"These are really tough questions, and we don't have the answers for now," said Amanda Wilson, a council of governments spokeswoman. "If you're not a member of the T, and not planning on it, I can imagine that rail is not in your future for the next two years."

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