

Proposed hyperloop to Chicago could be in line for federal infrastructure funds

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By Ed Blazina / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Backers of the proposed hyperloop corridor to link Pittsburgh, Columbus and Chicago through low-pressure tubes that can move passengers and freight at 700 mph believe their timing on the project couldn't be better.

Feasibility and environmental impact studies announced Wednesday by the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission to determine the exact pathway of the proposed system and its projected cost should be finished by early next year. That could dovetail with the beginning of the Trump administration's proposed \$1.5 trillion infrastructure program, which federal officials say will be looking to fund innovative projects.

"There's bipartisan support for projects that would provide solutions and engage people and use innovative technology," said Dan Katz, director of public policy and North American projects for Virgin Hyperloop, the company developing the technology. "[The federal government] really needs to incentivize local governments to develop innovative technology like this."

Construction of a hyperloop project likely would be through a public-private partnership, Mr. Katz and planners said.

Hyperloop technology uses magnetic force to send pods through low-pressure tubes at high speeds, similar to the pneumatic tubes banks use at drive-through windows. That process could deliver freight or passengers to Columbus in about 14 minutes, Chicago in 29 minutes.

Mr. Katz said the corridor was attractive to Virgin Hyperloop and should be to federal officials as well because it would improve the movement of freight in an important part of the country. About 5.9 million tons of goods moved through the corridor in 2015, and that is expected to grow to 9 million tons by 2040 without hyperloop.

Pittsburgh's leadership in transportation technology, particularly through Carnegie Mellon University, also is an advantage, he said.

Ohio planners announced Wednesday the start of a Rapid-Speed Transportation Initiative, the feasibility and environmental impact studies expected to cost about \$2.5 million. The two studies are an outgrowth of the commission's previous effort to study passenger service from Columbus to Chicago and now will review rail service throughout the 488-mile corridor as well.

Thea Walsh, transportation and funding director at the commission, said the studies will be done at the same time.

"The feasibility study really tells us whether that corridor works or not," Ms. Walsh said. "We're pretty sure it will. This time next year, we should be ready to move forward."

The initiative is being paid for by the commission and has contributions from three other Ohio communities: the city of Columbus (\$250,000), Marysville and surrounding Union County, and Lima (\$500,000 total). Mr. Katz said Virgin Hyperloop will work with the studies, providing the company's "unique knowledge" about the technology and the types of clearance and design specifications such a project would need.

There are no hyperloop systems in operation, but Mr. Katz said the firm will use information from a successful demonstration of the technology on a 500-meter test track in Nevada last summer, where the vehicle reached 200 mph. The company's other research can provide details such as potential cost and the turning radius the pods will need.

Mr. Katz said Virgin Hyperloop remains on track for debuting a functioning system by 2022, and Ms. Walsh said her organization is sold on the technology.

"We are definitely confident in our partner," Ms. Walsh said. "Thus far, we feel like they are at a stage where we should move forward with the feasibility study now."

Ms. Walsh said her agency remains in close contact with planning officials in Chicago and Pittsburgh, as well as state transportation officials in Pennsylvania and Indiana, but didn't ask for any money at this point because it had enough. The Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission couldn't be reached for comment, but Roger Cohen, senior adviser to PennDOT Secretary Leslie Richards, said the state has "a great deal of interest in staying informed" about the project.

The regional hyperloop project, dubbed Mid-West Connect, was among 10 around the world chosen to proceed in September after a competition called the Hyperloop One Challenge. The only other U.S. project that has proceeded to a feasibility study would link Denver with Pueblo and Vail, Colo., and Cheyenne, Wyo.

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