

Pittsburgh is now a Hyperloop One finalist: That could mean lunch breaks in Chicago

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By Ed Blazina / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Officials in Pittsburgh, Columbus and Chicago have proven the need for better ground transportation among the cities.

Now they have to determine whether they can develop the cooperation among multiple government agencies to meet that need through [high-speed pods](#) that use low-pressure tubes and magnetic force to carry people and freight at 700 miles an hour. If it can be done — technically, politically and economically — it could take just 14 minutes to go from Pittsburgh to Columbus and 29 minutes from the Steel City to Chicago.

A coalition of the cities known as Midwest Connect was one of 10 projects around the world to be selected Thursday for continued development by Hyperloop One, a California-based company developing transportation technology that's similar to the pneumatic tubes banks use in drive-through windows. The company received hundreds of proposals through a competition known as the Hyperloop One Challenge.

“We’re pretty excited. It’s been a good day for us,” said William Murdock, executive director of the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, which coordinated development of the regional proposal.

“As a winner ... [Hyperloop] told us we get to go from selling ourselves to studying the feasibility of putting a project in place.”

In its proposal, Midwest Connect stressed the amount of freight that already moves between the cities and how that is expected to increase. About 5.9 million tons of freight worth \$16.7 billion moved between the three cities in 2015 and that is projected to increase to 9 million tons by 2040 even without Hyperloop.

In addition, the 488-mile loop would be available to 13.8 million passengers who live in and between

the cities, making it possible to work in Chicago and live in Pittsburgh. Pods, prototypes of which are being developed at universities across the country including Carnegie Mellon, could hold 20 to 40 people.

Hyperloop will work with the 10 finalists to refine their corridors, choose where to locate stations and develop expected production costs and fares. Any project that reaches construction is expected to be a public-private partnership.

“We’re bullish on this route. It makes a lot of sense,” said Dan Katz, director of public policy and North American projects for Hyperloop. “We have a good sense of what they want to do.

“I think what it comes down to is government being willing to be innovative. This particular route goes through four states, so it will require an extra amount of cooperation and a lot of willingness to work together.”

James Hassinger, executive director of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission, said the region has demonstrated that willingness here.

“It’s a very positive thing that Hyperloop looked at this route and hundreds of other routes and said there’s a higher likelihood it can be successful here than elsewhere,” he said. “This did originate in Columbus, but they have been very much willing to partner with the groups on each end. They’ve been keeping us involved.”

One project, a 360-mile route that would link Denver with Pueblo and Vail, Colo., and Cheyenne, Wyo., will move straight to a feasibility study in which the Colorado Department of Transportation will work with engineering firm AECOM to refine its Hyperloop proposal. Mr. Katz said that’s only because that region already has the political coalition in place to proceed.

The other projects chosen to move ahead are two in the U.S. — Texas (640 miles linking Dallas, Laredo and Houston) and Florida (257 miles between Miami and Orlando). The others are 330 miles between Guadalajara and Mexico City, Mexico; 400 miles between Toronto and Montreal, Canada; two in the United Kingdom, 414 miles between Edinburgh and London and 339 between Glasgow and Liverpool; and two in India, 685 miles between Mumbai and Chennai and 208 miles between Bengaluru and Chennai.

Hyperloop was founded in 2014 by Josh Giegel, Brogan BamBrogan and Shervin Pishevar and employs more than 200. The firm has received at least \$141.1 million in investment capital, according to Crunchbase, a database for self-reported financials in the private sector.

Elon Musk brought the technology back to the public eye a few years ago, but he is not directly connected to the project. He does have ties with the co-founders of Hyperloop. One is a venture capitalist and another is former lead engineer for Mr. Musk's SpaceX company, which is pushing commercial space travel and coordinating the university competition for hyperloop pods.

Over the past two years, the company has been working to refine its technology to prove it works and make sure it is affordable. Mr. Katz said a test in early August in which a pod reached 192 mph over 1,000 feet shows the technology works.

Ohio planners are convinced, Mr. Murdock said. The agency has submitted substantial staff time to the project, he said, but that is just part of its duties as a regional planning agency.

“When we look at the technology, the more we think this was the right decision to go after the

challenge, and when this goes forward, we want to be the first one,” he said.

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