

BACK ON TRACK?

Amtrak railway possibility in North Louisiana 'looks better than it has before'

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Along-distance passenger rail service along the I-20 Corridor in North Louisiana has long been a dream and topic of discussion for local officials.

Now, the time seems right for the dream to come to fruition, said Bossier Parish Administrator Bill Altimus, who also serves as chair for the National Association of Counties subcommittee concerning transit and rail.

"I've been messing with it for 20 years, and this is really the first time I've seen pretty much perfect alignment on all sides that they want this done," Altimus said. "Everybody is in agreement and in sync to do this."

As Gov. John Bel Edwards is scheduled to meet with Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant in the coming weeks, the Bossier Parish Police Jury will vote soon on a resolution showing its support for this venture, which would involve Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas.

Amtrak service from Dallas currently stops in Marshall, Texas. The goal would be to connect passenger rail service from Meridian, Mississippi, through north Louisiana, which would link Dallas-Fort Worth all the way to Atlanta.

"It's still iffy, but it looks better than it has before," Bossier City Mayor Lo Walker said. "We're contacting the governor, senior officials from Amtrak, to let them know we are very supportive of this route." Bossier Parish Police Juror Wanda Bennett has been a participant in discussions to bring a railway to North Louisiana since the 1980s, when she served on the Bossier City Council. "One of the things that one of the other council members and I did was talk to a lot of the cities that had Amtrak back then to find out what the hidden cost was," she said. "The big problem at that point was that cities who had Amtrak actually subsidized them. At the end of the year, whatever they lost was reported to that city, the city was responsible for it, and it got into some really big money. We just kind of dropped the idea at the time."

Bennett said that late Bossier Mayor George Dement tried to pick up the ball again in 1989, but the project was never able to get off the ground.

Activity has been picking up in recent years, with studies administered by the East Texas Council of Governments and North Louisiana Council of Governments, said Kent Rogers, executive director of NLCOG. "Due to the success of these studies, Amtrak picked up the ball and took this project to the next level," Rogers said. "In 2015, Amtrak carried out a feasibility study and determined that the I-20 Corridor long-distance passenger rail route is economically viable, and there will be no annual operating subsidy for the states through which the route traverses." Rogers said the immediate need is for Congress to fully fund Amtrak and to increase their funding. The BPPJ resolution also urges Gov. Edwards and Amtrak President Wick Moorman "to move with all deliberate speed to establish this transportation alternative." Regarding the service west of Meridian, along with the

Baton Rouge-New Orleans corridor, Moorman expressed his thoughts in a letter to the Southern Rail Commission in early March.

“Amtrak strongly supports these projects and will continue to do everything we can to work with you to bring these services to completion,” he wrote.

While the latest analysis of the I-20 Corridor no longer includes subsidies, other investments would have to be made by affected cities, Altimus said.

That investment would involve paying for a depot to be created in either Shreveport or Bossier City.

Monroe and Ruston are also potential stops on the route, Altimus said.

“They expect two trains a day to run, one going east, one going west, and there will have to be some facilities created to do that,” he said. “It will be up to us individually to make that happen. Everybody’s got to realize that and be willing to write a check.”

Of the five potential station sites in the Shreveport- Bossier area identified in the North Louisiana Passenger Rail Feasibility Study completed in August 2015, the Traffic Street site in Bossier City best met the criteria and was chosen as the representative site for above study, Altimus said.

The final site selection is yet to be determined, and the future trajectory of the project is still unclear.

“We’ll see what the governors come up to and continue to keep pressing on,” Altimus said. “I think we really need to look at high-speed rail, just like they do in Europe, just like they do in Asia. I think you’ll be able to move a lot of people around quickly if we get it right.”

Traffic congestion on I-20 from Shreveport to Dallas is only expected to worsen over the next 10 years, Altimus said, which makes the need for passenger rail service more prevalent.

“What are the chances of adding additional lanes both ways on I-20? Slim to none,” he said. “But if you could get some kind of rail service, who wouldn’t use it?”