

High-speed rail plans in Texas, Florida gain support

Curtis Tate, McClatchy Newspapers, 3-9-14

WASHINGTON – When California Gov. Jerry Brown last month announced his bid for re-election, he renewed his push to build “the nation’s only high-speed rail system.”

But California has some competition in unlikely places.

Both Texas and Florida have plans for systems that would connect their major population centers with fast trains. But unlike California’s plan, which relies heavily on government funding to start rolling, their efforts will be funded by the private sector.

While the \$68 billion California project has earned nearly universal opposition from Republicans, GOP elected officials are lining up behind the Florida and Texas proposals.

Brown and President Barack Obama had both held up the California project as a model of the country’s infrastructure future. But with legal and political uncertainties clouding the effort, Florida and Texas could have their trains running years sooner.

Supporters of high-speed rail who gathered in Washington last month for their annual summit expressed frustration over the problems plaguing the California project. But they were encouraged by the developments in two states that had tried but failed to build high-speed rail systems before.

In January, U.S. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx threw his support behind the Texas Central High-Speed Railway. The privately funded effort would build a 200-mph train to connect Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston by 2022 at an estimated cost of \$10 billion. A future phase could connect those cities to Austin and San Antonio.

DOT would handle the environmental impact reviews for the project, but would not provide any funding.

“They like our project and they’re supporting us,” said Robert Eckels, president of the Texas Central Railway and a former county official in Houston. “It’s easy for them to like to the project because we’re not asking them to pay for it.”

Eckels said his project also has an expert partner in the Japan Central Railway, which built Japan’s high-speed rail system.

Entering urban areas poses challenges for both projects. But California’s terrain and geology add to the burden. The line must cross mountain passes at its northern and southern ends where construction will be expensive. It will also need to be built to reflect California’s earthquake risks.

The cost of California’s 520-mile system had ballooned to \$98 billion before planners decided to use existing Metrolink and Caltrain lines, shaving \$30 billion from the price tag.

But the “blended” approach has opened the project up to criticism that voters are not getting the system they were promised.

The trains would zip along at 200 mph in the Central Valley, and slow considerably in the urban regions anchoring the two ends of the system. While 125 mph is faster than most conventional rail service, it’s well

below what most of the world considers high-speed rail.

A proposal in Florida to begin operating a passenger train between Orlando and Miami faces similar challenges.

The privately backed All Aboard Florida train would use an existing freight route for most of its run. It would take about three hours to make a 240-mile trip that takes three and a half or four hours by car in normal traffic.

The \$1 billion project would have the trains moving sometime next year.

The train would not be high-speed rail in comparison to what's planned in California and Texas. It would pass through many developed areas, including Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach and the Treasure Coast. That will limit speeds to the 90 to 125 mph range.