

High-speed rail: Should Dallas to Fort Worth be Texas' first route?

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Exterior view of the proposed Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center development along Lamar Street. A high-speed rail station would be just south of the new Convention Center in the Cedars. (City of Dallas)

As congestion and accidents plague our roadways, innovative transportation solutions are key to sustaining our region's rapid growth. Though it seems utopian in Texas, high-speed rail could be a huge boon for the state if implemented strategically.

That's why a preliminary plan for a high-speed rail between downtown Dallas and downtown Fort Worth deserves more attention even as it raises questions about its viability and the level of public disclosure surrounding the planning.

The North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG), the regional body that advises on mobility, has been quietly chugging along on a plan for a high-speed rail corridor between Dallas and Fort Worth since spring 2020. This project is separate from the Dallas to Houston high-speed rail line that was going to be built by the private company Texas Central.

The plan is still in early stages but could affect residents in West Dallas, land near Reunion Tower and the new convention center development. The status of the Dallas to Houston project is uncertain at best, and without that extension, the Dallas to Fort Worth project may end up being an expensive solution to a traffic jam on Interstate 30.

NCTCOG studied 43 alignments. The train would reach a top speed of around 180 mph and stop at underground stations in downtown Fort Worth and in Arlington's entertainment district, according to the selected route. In Dallas, the train will travel about 75 feet above the ground through West Dallas with a station in the Cedars, just south of downtown. Around 90% of the route goes through publicly owned land, Michael Morris, director of transportation for NCTCOG, told us.

But some of it goes through private land owned by powerful stakeholders who have concerns about this project, a fact that could lead to significant disputes before all is said and done.

Morris has stressed that none of this is set in stone. He said that his organization is awaiting the greenlight from federal authorities to begin a 12-month environmental study process. NCTCOG cannot acquire right of way from private landowners, secure funding or identify a company to build the project until after this process is done.

The long-term vision is to use high-speed rail to link the Texas Triangle together. It's an admirable one because improving mobility between Dallas-Fort Worth, Austin, San Antonio and Houston, will revolutionize business and quality of life. But it's questionable for the Dallas to Fort Worth route to be the proof of concept for these idealistic plans.

Trinity Railway Express, the existing commuter rail line between downtown Dallas and Fort Worth, takes around an hour. The high-speed train would take 23 minutes and, unlike the TRE, have a stop in Arlington.

But no matter how the project is funded, high-speed rail is not cheap. The technology is worth investing in if there's a plan for creating the statewide network, and for that, we need more clarity on the status of the connection to Houston.

The Dallas to Houston project has faced issues since 2012 as Texas Central battled private landowners and struggled with funding and leadership changes internally. In August, Amtrak announced it was looking into a collaboration with Texas Central. Subsequently, the organizations applied to two Federal Railroad Administration grants together, breathing new life into the moribund effort.

An Amtrak spokesperson told us that the results for these grants should be out next month but didn't give us an update on the project's planning. Texas Central's website hasn't been updated since 2020, and its representatives did not respond to a request for comment.

NCTCOG's alignment for the Dallas to Fort Worth project is based on the preliminary work done for the Dallas to Houston line. The main reason the train will be elevated in Dallas with a station in the Cedars is because that site was approved for the Houston project in September 2020. If both projects come to fruition, passengers traveling from Fort Worth could have a 'one-seat ride' to Houston, without any transfers.

The plan for the elevated line isn't popular with everyone, though. Nearly 10% of the route that goes through private land is all in Dallas and concerned parties range from billionaire corporations to ordinary residents. For decades, Hunt Realty Investments has been holding out on a plot of land by Reunion Tower, where the proposed alignment will run. The company requested NCTCOG to consider putting the alignment below grade in Dallas like it will be in Fort Worth and Arlington.

The train will go over homes in West Dallas, as per the current alignment. A representative for the area said residents have been working with NCTCOG to find a compromise that works for everyone.

Whether it's high-speed rail or highways, some groups, irrespective of the influence they wield in the city, will have to make sacrifices for the greater good. NCTCOG seems open to altering the alignment, but interestingly, the high-speed rail station is right next to one of Dallas' big ticket projects — the new Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center. The master developer of that project, Jack Matthews, also owns the land in the Cedars where the high-speed rail terminal is planned.

The nearly \$3 billion convention center project is expected to be complete by 2028. The proposed development aims to make the surrounding areas, including the Cedars, a lively entertainment district for convention-goers and residents alike. This includes improving multimodal transportation in the area, and the master plan accounts for the potential high-speed rail station.

The Convention Center master plan was first developed in February 2021 and since then, so much about the Dallas to Houston project has changed that it raises the question about whether Texas Central, NCTCOG and the city of Dallas have accounted for different possibilities.

High-speed rail sounds great in concept, and we support a network of rail that links the Texas Triangle. But a much deeper public discussion needs to be held before we commit to turning over public and private land, not to mention public money, to a concept that might just shave a few minutes off a trip to Arlington.

Absent a deeper public and private commitment to the full project throughout the state, this could become a very expensive and lightly used Dallas bauble.



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