

# Hopes for Austin-San Antonio rail get boost

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The Texas Transportation Commission approved a comprehensive, statewide rail plan this month that includes the Lone Star Rail plan, aimed at linking San Antonio and Austin with commuter rail.

At the same time, an internal TxDOT study is indicating that a high-speed rail system from Houston would be cheaper if it connected to Austin instead of San Antonio.

The unfunded plans, while an important step forward, are akin to discussing which toppings will go on a pizza when no one has money to order.

"We don't want to raise expectations yet, because there is no money," Alamo Regional Mobility Authority Vice Chairman **Robert Thompson** said. "Let's be patient. It's not time to order yet."

The Texas rail plan, known as the 2035 Statewide Long-Range Transportation Plan, was adopted on Nov. 18 after an aggressive effort to finish before state lawmakers convene in January.

The plan was also given a push from the federal government, which left Texas in the dark regarding more than \$8 billion in funding awards because the state did not have a cohesive plan.

## *Lone Star's aligning*

For the Lone Star rail plan, which has been under serious planning for years, inclusion in the Texas rail plan satisfied one of four conditions the Federal Railroad Administration said must be accomplished if local planners want the administration to take the lead, said **Bill Glavin**, TxDOT's rail chief.

Three of the four conditions have now been met. The final is approval from the Surface Transportation Board, a federal regulatory agency charged with resolving railroad rate and service disputes and reviewing proposed railroad mergers.

Glavin said the STB review is under way.

The rail plan will also be included in a multiyear Texas-Oklahoma high-speed rail study announced in October.

In September, TxDOT also allocated \$8.7 million for the second phase of a preliminary engineering study needed for Lone Star Rail.

### ***The Houston Connection***

Apart from the Lone Star rail plan, two proposals have been floating around on a high-speed rail network connecting the Dallas, Houston and San Antonio-Austin regions.

One proposal, known as the “T-bone” or “wishbone,” runs a line from Dallas through Austin, to San Antonio.

The other part of the “bone” connects Houston to Temple — north of Austin.

Another plan proposes a triangle connecting the three large metros.

Whether San Antonio or Austin would be the third point of such a triangle is unknown.

Thompson said a study, complete or nearly complete, indicates it will be cheaper to connect Houston to Austin because less right of way would have to be bought.

“Being from San Antonio, I was not fond of that idea,” Thompson said. “In a friendly kind of debate, we will have to decide that.”

Glavin said that while Austin would appear cheaper, it is assumed that a line from Houston to San Antonio would have greater ridership.

More riders equals more money, which could offset the greater cost of connecting to San Antonio.

Amtrak already provides service between San Antonio and Houston, and that line, owned by Union Pacific Corp., could also be converted.

If the triangle plan eventually emerges as the favored plan, either Austin or San Antonio would receive an economic boost from the connection.

That question will be studied over the next two to three years, Glavin said.

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**