

# In a jam over I-35 relief

## Transportation officials disagree about need for commuter rail

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SAN ANTONIO — Marjorie Evans likes the idea of a commuter train between Austin and San Antonio. She likes the idea of getting the 18-wheelers off Interstate 35 even better.

"The traffic is horrible. It feels like a video game, dodging semis, other cars and construction barricades," Ms. Evans, 36, said of her occasional 90-mile trip up I-35 to visit friends in Austin. "I wouldn't mind a train ride. But I'll settle for not having to fight the trucks."

So will the rest of Central Texas, at least for a while. The long-held dream of the region's leaders for a rapid rail link between Austin and San Antonio took a small step forward this year with the creation of the 16-member Austin-San Antonio Commuter Rail District. The emphasis, however, has shifted toward first moving freight, not people.

"It just makes sense. Each freight car equals about three 18-wheelers, and the more we can open up I-35, the quicker we can get smarter about our mobility plans," said Austin City Council member Will Wynn, a longtime corridor rail link advocate. "Increased use of fixed rail to speed up freight and people is a very exciting way to do that. And it's just fun to think that one day, we can board a train in Austin to see a Spurs game in San Antonio."

The idea is simple enough. The current version of the corridor rail link concept involves moving the 27 to 35 Union Pacific freight trains that roll between San Antonio and Austin each day to rail lines to be built along the new state Highway 130, the long-delayed tollway through Central Texas that will connect Georgetown north of Austin and Seguin just northeast of San Antonio.

Both Texas 130 and the proposed rail line would ease the logjam that is I-35, one of the most heavily congested thoroughfares in the nation, while providing shippers a faster route to move rail freight to and from the border.

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## Interstate options debated

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"People recognize the key role a freight rail line can have in easing congestion," said Ross Milloy, president of the Austin-San Antonio Corridor Council, a long-range planning organization. "The rail district board's role is to chart a path for creation of a rail line linking the corridor communities, set up organization parameters and develop a budget and financing options."

Longer-range plans call for using the existing Union Pacific lines that lie just west of I-35 for development of a commuter rail line connecting the communities between San Antonio and Austin.

### Commuter rail critics

Officials at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, an I-35 corridor think tank, have long criticized the corridor commuter rail plan as too expensive and inefficient.

Their studies indicated that operating costs per passenger mile for commuter light rail averaged 73 cents, compared with 14 cents for the best express bus system and 33 cents for an average bus system.

Foundation president Jeff Judson applauded efforts to move freight traffic to the railroads to eliminate traffic jams. But commuter rail in the corridor is an idea whose time still hasn't come, he said.

"I don't think the commuter rail concept will ever fly," Mr. Judson said. "Frankly, what is the economic benefit to the smaller communities in the corridor? What benefit accrues to Buda or San Marcos when they stand by and watch the passenger train speed by?"

A 1999 study from the Texas Department of Transportation said a 110-mile commuter rail line between Austin and San Antonio was feasible. The federal government would split the estimated \$475 million construction cost with state and regional governmental entities. The study projected that within 20 years, the system would move 11,000 passengers each weekday.

A combination of revenue, sales and use taxes and various local, state and federal funds would cover the estimated \$24 million annual operating cost. "The nearly \$500 million cost is high. But to build four highway interchanges on I-35 would cost \$100 million each and would be obsolete the day they were finished," Mr. Milloy said. "This is a 100-year opportunity, for we are now building the transportation system for the next 100 years."

The district board named this month will be the clearinghouse for various rail initiatives and will set the organization and financing of a proposed rail line in motion. Federal transportation funds will

provide \$5.2 million for initial studies, with \$400,000 in matching funds coming from participating regional entities.

The district does not have taxing authority. And there is no timetable for construction to begin.

Critics dispute the projected effect of train riders on congestion along I-35. They note that I-35 carried about 186,000 cars daily in Austin and 182,000 in San Antonio in 2000. "That still leaves a lot of cars on I-35," Mr. Judson said.

### Crowded and hazardous

The tremendous increase in traffic along I-35 in Central Texas was spurred largely by population growth in the region and the huge jump in rail and truck traffic due to increased trade with Mexico.

Auto traffic has nearly doubled in 10 years. For each 1 percent growth in population, traffic increases 3 percent, the U.S. Transportation Department says.

"In I-35's 1,700-mile length from Minnesota to Laredo, the highest traffic congestion and fatality rate occurs in the segment between San Antonio and Austin," Mr. Milloy said.

Traffic fatalities average 100 a year between San Antonio and Georgetown. In 1998, there were 161 traffic deaths. While truck traffic has grown 6 percent in Texas, it's grown 10 percent along the corridor, Mr. Milloy said.

### An industry magnet?

Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff, an ardent commuter rail plan supporter, thinks a Central Texas rail line might help bring a Toyota Motors truck assembly plant to San Antonio.

San Antonio is competing with Arkansas for the plant. State officials said the new plant would mean 4,000 high-paying jobs and would generate \$1 billion to the state economy within five years.

"This is something long overdue. It lets us show that we can operate as a team and that we are

looking to the future," Mr. Wolff said.

While the results of the Toyota negotiations won't be finalized until early next year, Mr. Wolff has already gained \$15 million in state support to build a separate rail spur near the proposed site in south Bexar County.

For San Antonio developer Martin Wender, who sits on the Austin-San Antonio Corridor Council, the time for talk about creating a commuter rail line is over.

"The impetus for movement on the commuter rail project is that we need to need to get it done," he said. "San Antonio is ready. Austin is ready. The communities in between are all ready to get moving on it."

He agrees that Toyota's interest in San Antonio is another reason to get moving more quickly on the project.

"They clearly see something beneficial in South Texas. Often, people outside see something in us that we don't believe ourselves," he said. "When Toyota is interested, it's time we start believing in ourselves."

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