

Plans for Houston-Dallas bullet train moving along
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DALLAS - Plans for high-speed rail in Texas will speed up in 2016, company officials said Friday, as the first comprehensive examination of the Houston-to-Dallas line is on pace for release in the summer and design changes are taking shape.

Tim Keith, CEO of Texas Central Partners, said the company remains confident that its plan is viable. It calls for trains leaving every 30 minutes and making the trip between the two metro areas in 90 minutes."Envision in your mind the two cities growing closer together through urban sprawl and development," Keith said, "but farther apart for car travel and air travel because of congestion."

The project, company officials said, is expected to begin construction in 2017 and start operating by 2021. Prices, Keith said, would be driven by competition and would vary by time of day and amenities, similar to first-class and coach air travel."It would be priced to, on the upper end, compete with airlines for the business traveler, and on the low end to pull people out of their vehicles," he said.

The line is expected to cost more than \$10 billion, though the final cost will be determined by land prices, engineering costs and the number of elevated crossings the train will make. Those considerations already are having an effect on the project, Keith said. Opposition in rural areas has led officials to focus on building more expensive concrete viaducts rather than earthen beams for the elevated train.

"It is much more expensive to build viaducts, but it is a more neighborly way to enter the community," Keith said.

Organizers must conduct months of planning and wade through various political processes before construction can begin. A final determination on where Texas Central can build the line will be made following more study by the Federal Railroad Administration, which must authorize the project. After that, Texas Central and its investors will decide whether to proceed. The first step is a draft environmental report that will be released in the summer, Keith predicted. In the meantime, officials are hosting open houses to discuss the project, including one scheduled Monday in Houston. Texas Central has faced opposition from rural residents who fear the lines will ruin their quiet lifestyle and pristine views.

Thirty-three local and state officials - including state Sen. Lois Kolkhorst of Brenham, state Rep. Will Metcalf of Conroe and state Rep. Cecil Bell of Magnolia - recently sent a letter to the Japanese ambassador to the U.S. noting their strong opposition to the project. Japan's international bank is expected to play a major role in the financing, though Japanese officials said it is a private project.

Houston and Dallas lawmakers support the rail line. Leaders of both large metro areas believe connecting the cities offers a huge economic benefit. "I look forward to boarding a high speed train to Houston as soon as possible," said Don Huffines, R-Dallas, vice-chairman of the Texas Senate Transportation Committee. "I only wish it went to Austin because that's where I've got to go."

The state has neither the funding nor the authority to spend money on rail projects, as the Legislature has only approved limited rail investment through TxDOT. The state does have a role in working with Texas Central on development of the project, including possibly assisting with property acquisition but not funding property purchases. "Let's don't make it happen for them; let's give them every opportunity to succeed," said Texas Transportation Commission member Victor Vandergriff.