

# Commissioners hear high-speed rail debate in night session

By Greg Bowen New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung | Posted: Thursday, April 21, 2011 10:29 pm

NEW BRAUNFELS — A passenger rail line could be running through New Braunfels in maybe four or five years, using existing Union Pacific tracks to speed residents at 70 mph to San Antonio or Austin in about a half-hour.

Fares would be around \$12 from downtown Austin to downtown San Antonio, and riders could chose any of 15 to 20 trains that would run daily, some of them speedy expresses making few stops, others stopping at each of 16 stations — including one in New Braunfels — along the 117-mile route from Georgetown to south San Antonio.

That's the picture painted by Sid Covington of Austin, chairman of the Lone Star Rail District board, a state agency working to bring that vision to life.

Covington invited Comal County Commissioners' Court to join in the regional planning effort during a Thursday evening workshop.

The workshop was the second of the new evening sessions held by the court in an effort to allow more citizens to have a voice in county government issues.

Approximately 15 citizens attended, with several of them rising to express their opinions on passenger rail — and thanking commissioners for holding the new evening sessions.

Dr. Martin Levett said he and other members of the Citizens' Alliance for Smart Expansion totally backed the passenger rail idea. Lee Rahe said he appreciated that county officials were thinking about ways to make life better. Miguel Puga said he'd ridden passenger trains in France and Finland that had become part of the community and the culture — and he wished the local effort success.

On the other side of the issue were contractor Dean Word, who warned that such rail ventures elsewhere have ended up being a burden in perpetuity on local taxpayers, and local physician and New Braunfels City Council candidate Beverly Nuckols, who cautioned that passenger rail lines in places like Las Vegas are going bankrupt and always seem to have to be subsidized.

In the end, County Judge Sherman Krause and County Commissioner Greg Parker indicated they wanted to continue to explore the idea.

Krause said passenger rail could have benefits, including taking traffic off I-35 and cutting highway maintenance costs and pollution.

“It's certainly something we need to think about,” Krause said.

Parker said it might be a wise investment to pay the \$49,500 fee that Comal County would have to put down to join the other counties, cities (including the City of New Braunfels) and transit agencies in the Lone Star Rail District.

“This county is growing. We have to be visionary now,” Parker said. “To not plan is a worse disservice to the community.”

Covington encouraged Comal to join the effort.

“From a planning standpoint, it hurts you not to be there,” he said.

If commissioners were to join, he said, they could elect one of their members to serve on the “LStar” board.

He said passenger rail would provide a reliable transportation alternative for commuters now using I-35, cut congestion and travel times, reduce accidents and spur economic development.

“The train schedules would be reliable. You can’t say that about driving up and down 35,” Covington said.

He said a big hurdle was overcome in November when Union Pacific agreed to give LStar one of its lines along I-35 in trade for a new “freight bypass line” that Lone Star Rail would build for Union Pacific to the east. Some local freight trains — including trains from area quarries — would continue to run on the passenger rail lines as well.

Covington said funding mechanisms are still being figured out, and private sector investment is being sought.

He said estimates are that initial capital costs would be \$394 million, rising to \$613 million as more trains and track is added.

Fares and on-train advertising would pay for only about 30 percent of costs, he said.

Current thinking is to split costs into thirds, with Austin paying a third, San Antonio paying a third, and the other smaller cities and counties paying the final third.

Krause said when the court planned its new evening sessions, the discussion enjoyed Thursday was “exactly what we had in mind” because it gave citizens a chance to air their views and provided commissioners with information they can use in decision making.

Another evening session is planned for 6 p.m. Tuesday on the topic of the redistricting process based on the 2010 Census.

The session will be at Commissioners; Courtroom, 199 Main Plaza, New Braunfels.