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[Back to previous page](#)



## Transportation officials explore possible passenger rail expansion in Kan., Okla., Mo., Texas

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Expanding passenger rail service through Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas would cost the federal and state governments hundreds of millions of dollars, according to a recently released study that looked at several proposals for the region.

One option it examined would provide nighttime passenger train service between Fort Worth, Texas, and Newton, Kansas. Another would establish daytime service between Fort Worth and Kansas City. Both options would use an existing stretch of Burlington Northern Santa Fe tracks that pass through Lawrence, Topeka and Wichita in Kansas as well as Oklahoma City.

The analysis released earlier this month had to be completed to apply for federal funding. It follows up on a feasibility study completed by Amtrak in March 2010 and looks at such things as the route schedule and the infrastructure cost.

Passenger rail backer Mark Corrison said Congress could agree to pay up to 80 percent of the cost under the Passenger Rail Investment Act.

“The price tag isn’t much at all,” said Corrison, secretary of the Northern Flyer Alliance, a nonprofit that lobbies for passenger rail development for 65 communities between Kansas City and Fort Worth.

“If you take 80 percent of the costs off the total development, which would be split between three states, it’s not a very large burden for the state to support to develop this.”

Dennis Slimmer, chief of transportation planning for the Kansas Department of Transportation, said the agency would present the study to the Kansas Legislature during its upcoming session. The \$500,000 passenger rail study was done with a \$250,000 federal grant and matching money from the transportation departments in Kansas and Oklahoma. Transportation agencies in Texas and Missouri provided information used to complete the study but no funding.

“The Legislature will determine what happens with this next,” Slimmer said. “I don’t know what the chances are. Realistically, we will have to get federal funding, but there is no guarantee for that.”

The expanded service would require the construction of more stretches of double track and other upgrades, in part to ensure that passenger trains wouldn’t stall freight trains. Those infrastructure improvements would cost \$132.5 million for the nighttime service and \$368.2 million for the daytime service. To do both projects would cost only \$403 million because some of the improvements needed for the daytime service are required for the nighttime service, too.

Night service also would require the \$4 million purchase of an additional coach car, and day service would require buying two train sets, a spare locomotive and coach and food service cars at a cost of \$68 million.

The participating states would share an annual operating subsidy of \$4.4 million for night service and \$10 million for day service. That would be on top of the money Texas and Oklahoma already pay to subsidize a train called the Heartland Flyer.

The nighttime option would essentially expand the route of the Heartland Flyer, which travels south from Oklahoma City in the morning hours and returns in the evening, with an afternoon layover in Fort Worth. With the expansion, the route would start and end in Newton in the early morning hours. From Newton, travelers could catch Amtrak’s Southwest Chief, which travels back and forth from Chicago to Los Angeles, passing through Kansas City along the way.

The standalone daytime service between Kansas City and Fort Worth would provide a second daily train in each direction on the stretch of track between Oklahoma City and Fort Worth. The study said travel time between Kansas City and Fort Worth would be 12 hours and 20 minutes.

Under the daytime plan, stations and stops also could be added in the Kansas cities of Wichita, Shawnee, Emporia, Strong City and Arkansas City, and the Oklahoma communities of Ponca City, Perry, Guthrie and Edmond. The plan also proposes additional stops in Davis, Okla., and in the Krum and Denton area in Texas. The communities would bear the cost of adding the stations, with the possible help of grant money.

“We haven’t heard a lot in the way of pushback from folks but we know that once they start talking about real dollars people will start being more serious in their analysis of whether it is really one of the highest priorities or not,” Slimmer said. “It would be nice if it was because I think a lot of people would like to be able to ride the train.”

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