

RTC hears latest on ideas to fast-track Cotton Belt; new approach unveiled that would upend the way transportation decisions are made

By Michael Lindenberger/Reporter
mlindenberger@dallasnews.com | Bio

12:06 PM on Thu., Jan. 12, 2012 | [Permalink](#)

Summary: Should highways, toll roads and rail lines be built to make it easier for traffic-weary residents to get where they want to go? Or should they be built where they can have the biggest impact on development, an impact that would draw riders and passengers eventually, essentially creating a demand for the services where none previously existed?

That question lies at the heart of a debate over an ambitious new approach that North Texas regional planners say could speed up by decades construction of a 62-mile rail line known as the Cotton Belt.

The ideas will be discussed today at the Regional Transportation Council, at 1:30 p.m.

The Regional Transportation Council will be briefed this afternoon about a big-deal transportation idea that would bring the Cotton Belt rail line online years ahead of schedule -- if a range of significant hurdles can be cleared. ([Rodger Jones wrote about this last week.](#))

It could also usher in a whole new way of financing major transportation projects, one that would involve adapting to rail the private-sector financing approach that has transformed the way Texas builds and operates its major new highways.

It could also involve creating a new authority to administer the financing for the (estimated) \$2 billion rail project, and introduce higher fares based on length of trips even as it uses higher property taxes (**Note:** for non-residential property) to "capture" a larger share of the wealth that major infrastructure creates for those who own property nearby.

At its core, the new approach would, [in the words of a report issued in December](#), turn transit-oriented development on its head. Land-use planning would be tied to transportation planning in a way that would lead to developed-oriented transit.

In other words: The idea is to plan transportation projects with an eye toward their development impact, not the other way around.

In a sense, it's an old, and sometimes controversial, idea. It's why the Portland streetcar system along Pearl Street was built in a distressed area of town where there was little evident need for street cars, an example the report cites at length. Instead, the cars attracted development, which in turn attracted people and riders.

In our area, it's been the same motivation for some to argue in favor of extending the Dallas North Tollway to once-rural expanses. That was done not because there were lots of drivers clamoring for a toll road in those areas, but because it was assumed that once it was built, more development would follow and eventually attract the drivers who would use the road.

And finally, the big idea is one that backers of the Cotton Belt believe could put North Texas on the map nationally as a model for how to build expensive infrastructure in the future, even as federal and state tax dollars dwindle.

"The Cotton Belt - a single rail corridor - is the specific focus of this initiative. But the transportation funding implications of the iFi transcend this corridor. They are larger even than the entire D-FW region. Indeed, the region is poised to lead the way for the nation." Ron Natinsky and Jungus [Jordan](#), writing in the December 2011 report.

The Cotton Belt would, tentatively, string 19 stations along 62 miles roughly from [Fort Worth](#) to [Plano](#) and [Richardson](#). Its backers, so far led by [Michael Morris](#) of the North Central Texas Council of Governments and the Regional Transportation Council, say a final plan of action for fast-tracking the Cotton Belt could be ready within a few years rather than decades.

Today at the RTC, Morris will update the council on the December report, which consultants were paid more than \$1 million to produce, and ask members if they want to formally endorse or accept its findings.

More important, though, is an ongoing effort to develop a plan for phase II of the effort, one that would produce a recommendation for how to move forward with the right mix of funding initiatives to get the project built. That is at least one month, and perhaps more, from being presented.

Meanwhile, it's too early to say whether the ideas contained in the December report would be embraced by local governments along the rail line. How, for instance, would local school districts, county commissioners and cities feel about sharing property taxes on land near the new stations?

Would property owners be sufficiently interested in what the new rail line could do for their land values to agree to a higher property tax as a kind of "access

charge" that is levied on property near the new stations? If they don't agree, would officials attempt to make the charge mandatory?

And finally, how will the public at large feel about committing so much energy and money into a transportation project that is only incidentally about transportation? It's a rail line, after all, that DART has placed near the bottom of its agenda -- pushing it out decades. Even some of its supporters concede that the reason to build the Cotton Belt is to encourage land development along its corridor, rather than meet a giant need for transit services.

That doesn't make it a bad idea, by itself. Many area leaders, including Dallas city manager Mary Suhm to take one example, see the biggest payoff for the historic investment in DART still to come, when enough service is in place that rail begins influencing the development patterns of Dallas, making it denser. In that sense, building a new rail line whose first and best justification is its impact on property values and land-use patterns might be a good idea.

But it is new, and won't be easily digested by taxpayers, riders or elected officials without a very public and very patient public discussion.

I won't be at the meeting today, but I'm writing about the discussion now because it's too important, and too complex, to leave for hurried discussions in the coming months.