

# Passenger rail plan considered in Ohio

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The Ohio Rail Development Commission is rolling out a \$3.5 billion plan to develop a passenger network throughout the state that could become self-sufficient once it's up and running.

The commission's two-year proposal for Ohio and Lake Erie Regional Rail Hub calls for using existing railroad rights-of-way where tracks could be added or rehabilitated to build a network. The network could be used both for new, high-speed passenger service and improved freight service, commission spokesman Stu Nicholson said Friday.

From Cleveland, passengers could get to Columbus, Pittsburgh and Buffalo in about two hours - faster than driving in each case. Airports could be tied into the network as connecting points.

But don't go out and buy a train ticket just yet. More study is needed, and no construction money is available at this point, the commission said in releasing its results.

"If all the stars are in alignment, we're talking nine years out before we could run the trains," Nicholson said.

Despite the lack of construction money, Nicholson said the time is right to get prepared.

Currently, the Federal Railroad Administration does not provide construction money to states for such projects, but it is an idea that has been proposed by the Bush administration, said Steve Kulm, a spokesman for the federal agency.

The concept would be similar to how the federal government treats public-transit agencies such as the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority. The federal government provides money for construction but not for day-to-day operations.

"We believe passenger rail has a future," Kulm said. "There is a need. But funding is always an issue."

Rep. Steven LaTourette, a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, predicted that "the federal government will make the investment" in passenger rail infrastructure.

As chairman of the House subcommittee on railroads in the upcoming session, LaTourette said he intends to focus on high-speed rail options.

Major transportation projects, rail or highway, often run in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

For example, the Ohio Department of Transportation's 10-year plan for major new road projects totals \$5 billion. And the two major highway-widening projects in Ohio - converting the Ohio Turnpike to six lanes from Toledo to Pennsylvania and Interstate 71 to six lanes between Columbus and Cleveland - cost about \$600 million each.

The Ohio Rail Development Commission, an independent commission within the Ohio Department of Transportation, is circulating the hub study among public officials and

community leaders. The goal at this point is to secure about \$5 million to do more detailed environmental and economic impact studies, Nicholson said.

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