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Speedy trains foreseen in N.C.

Officials say it all depends on money

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Sarah Lindenfeld Hall, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - It's not going to zip you to Washington, D.C., as fast as the lightning-quick Eurostar train that covers the distance between London and Paris in less than three hours.

But some day, speakers at a conference on high-speed rail said Monday, a fast train might take travelers across the Southeast, passing through Raleigh on the way from Washington to Charlotte and points south.

Rail leaders said rapid passenger trains have to be part of the transportation solution in an area where population growth has outpaced highway construction, and where freight train traffic has increased -- showing that trains still have a place in the modern-day mix.

But money is tight these days, even for roads. An estimated \$65 billion is needed in North Carolina for new roads and maintenance. A growing number of state legislative leaders say a special session or blue-ribbon commission is needed to overhaul the way North Carolina distributes money on roads and maintenance.

Rail supporters emphasized Monday that trains can be a less- expensive and more energy-efficient solution than highways and airports.

"Rail is not here to compete, but rather to be included," said Pat Simmons, rail division director for the state Department of Transportation.

In 1992, the federal transportation department designated the so-called Southeast High Speed Rail Corridor as one of five such corridors.

It's an expensive project. Reconstructing, upgrading and building rail lines between Washington and Charlotte alone will cost \$3.5 billion, or about \$7.5 million per mile.

But supporters at Monday's conference, hosted by the state chapter of the Women's Transportation Seminar, say the price tag for rapid rail is about one-third less per mile than interstate highway projects of similar size.

And, they say, people will still ride a train. Last year, more than 567,000 people in North Carolina rode the train on trips that averaged about 200 miles, in spite of Amtrak's limited service and reliability problems.

Blast from the past?

If those people had been on the road, Simmons said, they would have had a noticeable impact on traffic congestion.

That's ridiculous, said David Hartgen, professor emeritus at UNC-Charlotte and a critic of rail revival.

About 101 billion vehicle miles were traveled in North Carolina in 2005, compared to the roughly 113 million miles people traveled by train in 2006.

Rail travel is from a time of the past, of interest mainly to wealthy retirees looking to relive their youth, Hartgen said. Government shouldn't spend tax money on it.

"If you think this is really cheaper and really so cost-efficient, why don't you get a group of people together and build a railroad rather than ask the government to build it," Hartgen said.

High-speed rail, with top speeds at 110 mph, would mean better service for passengers, supporters say. It also would mean bigger and better rail lines that could move freight faster.

Four years ago, CSX Transportation mostly avoided passenger rail. Now it's more interested, said Lisa Mancini, CSX vice president for strategic infrastructure initiatives, because of the growth in freight business and new political pressures to make passenger travel more reliable and convenient.

"We think it's in our strategic interest," Mancini said during a panel discussion

.

Nancy Dunn, chairwoman of the transit, ferry and rail committee of the state Board of Transportation, said she's "cautiously optimistic" that North Carolinians could be riding high-speed trains by 2015.

Of course, she added, it all depends on the money.

sarah.lindenfeld@newsobserver.com or (919) 829-8983

N.C. HIGH-SPEED RAIL INFO:

WHAT: A proposed high-speed passenger rail corridor with train speeds averaging 85-90 mph and up to 110 mph.

WHERE: Planned routes from Washington, D.C., through Richmond, Va., and Raleigh to Charlotte. Extensions to Hampton Roads, Va.; from Charlotte through Spartanburg and Greenville, S.C., to Atlanta, Macon, Ga., and Jacksonville, Fla.; from Raleigh through Columbia, S.C., and Savannah, Ga., to Jacksonville Fla.; and from Atlanta to Birmingham, Ala. The goal is to extend service from the existing high-speed rail in the Northeast to the Southeast.

WHEN: Tentative opening, 2015.

HOW MUCH: About \$3.5 billion for a corridor connecting Raleigh to Washington and Charlotte.

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