

Star-Telegram

North Texas TEXRail is a little train that can

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Dick Ruddell says it's "a little too early" to settle on a date when commuter trains will start running between southwest Grapevine and Dallas/Fort Worth Airport.

Ruddell, president and executive director of the Fort Worth Transportation Authority, the T, is a master of understatement.

Once called the Southwest-to-Northeast train and now called TEXRail, commuter service on the Cotton Belt rail line has been the eyes of local transportation planners for more than a decade. Ruddell reported on the status of those plans at Tuesday's Council meeting and spoke with the *Star-Telegram* Editorial Board on Monday.

The T's projections show that TEXRail would be used for 18,000 passenger trips per day, about twice the number on the Trinity Railway Express route between Dallas and Fort Worth. The project is expected to cost \$750 million, with about half from federal funds.

Ruddell did have progress to report. There's even a date on which, if all other mileposts are arrived at on time, passengers can board TEXRail trains. It's Aug. 29, 2016.

Simply producing a detailed schedule of what needs to be done and by when was a big step toward that goal. Key initiatives have been approved by the Federal Transit Administration.

Ruddell was reserved because there are still many uncertainties about the plan, starting with whether the FTA will give the T a month to begin preliminary engineering work.

There are serious questions about whether all the planned federal money will be available. Congress usually puts aside what's called New Starts transit funding, but continuing budget battles in Washington make that far from certain.

And there are big issues to be resolved locally.

The T has been planning to use "push-pull" trains like those on the TRE. But the Cotton Belt line is owned by Dallas Area Rapid Transit, which also wants to use the portion from Grapevine to Addison and beyond for passenger service. All the trains would be built at DFW.

DART wants to use sleeker, more modern-looking, self-propelled rail cars like those planned for a recently completed

The problem for the T is that those cars cost twice as much and hold only half as many people as push-pull trains, Ruddell also noted. They're also not made in the United States, and the T must use U.S.-made vehicles if it expects to get federal funding, he said.

A grand but feasible way out would be to persuade a foreign manufacturer to set up a plant in the U.S. to tap demand for high-speed transportation needs across the country. Or a U.S. manufacturer could form a joint venture with a foreign company to produce the foreign design.

Fort Worth Councilman Jungus Jordan, chairman of the Regional Transportation Council, said both of those routes are

Finally, among the big problems faced by TEXRail is track rights.

The T wants the commuter trains to pass through downtown Fort Worth, but to do so they would have to use right-of-way owned by Union Pacific for its extensive freight rail service.

Negotiations on an agreement with UP are slow but steady.