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Point Person: Our Q&A with Texas Rail Advocates president Peter LeCody



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Texas Rail Advocates held its eighth annual Southwestern Rail Conference in Dallas last week. Points asked president Peter LeCody why high-speed rail appears off-track nationally and what the future holds for Texas.

President Barack Obama offered a big vision

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and big money for a national high-speed rail network in 2009, but the showpiece projects are dead or dying. What happened?

First, full disclosure: I am a fiscal conservative who wants the best bang for his transportation buck regardless of road, rail, air or water.

Now, the answer: politics, priorities and posturing. Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker ran a “no train” campaign to get elected, rejected high-speed federal rail funds and then turned around later to ask for some of it back. The Obama administration said no way. (A major chunk of Walker’s campaign contributions came from, of all sources, road builders.) Ohio Gov. John Kasich killed a Cleveland-Columbus-Cincinnati rail plan and turned back funding. In Florida, Gov. Rick Scott turned back \$2.4 billion and overrode a plea from Republican Congressman John Mica, who chairs the House Transportation Committee.

Were these rail plans not economically viable, or is this one of those red vs. blue lines in the sand? Regardless, all those funds were redistributed to states that plan to develop surface transportation solutions by rail.

What’s your assessment of the California project, the way it has doubled in cost and now faces wide opposition? Is it a boondoggle, as designed?

I’m going to irk a lot of rail advocates, but I was not in favor of the California project. California has yet to realize that it went bankrupt several years ago and needs to go on a deep fiscal diet. The feds can pour all the money into the California high-speed rail plan they want to, but the state can’t afford its share.

And why do trains have to travel at 220 mph? I have traveled often throughout the United Kingdom on their “high-speed network” that runs at 125 mph. At that speed, it costs a lot less to build and maintain, and the trains are used extensively by the public.

Is Texas more conducive to high-speed rail than California?

Texas has a distinct advantage of topography. Having essentially flat land between North Texas and both Austin-San Antonio and Houston means the cost per mile of building the infrastructure is much lower. The majority of the railroad right of way between our major cities is rural, and there is plenty of room for parallel tracks with little impact to the environment.

In a survey of Texans by a study group at the University of Texas in Austin, most respondents favor creating passenger rail corridors between our major cities. The public gets it; the politicians have been a little slower to respond.

What kind of passenger rail do you see in Texas in 25 years?

I’d like to think we would have three levels of service — “feeder lines” from the midsize and smaller cities at existing speeds of 79 mph by improving existing freight rail lines, higher-speed service in corridors that connect regional areas (up to 110 mph) and high-speed (125-150 mph) service between our largest metropolitan areas.

I see an Amtrak-type entity providing national rail network service along with some corridor lines, but also a new breed of independent rail operators emerging to provide service where needed.

And do you see true super-high-speed bullet trains that go more than 200 mph?

I do not, unless private-equity firms bring along a pot of money. Because of the staggering cost of building and maintaining a bullet train network, it makes more sense to establish rail corridors at speeds that will get us from Point A to Point B in a reasonable amount of time with frequent service at a cost that can be justified.

You’re a frequent Amtrak passenger. What kind of people choose to ride rail when a car or air

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provides better convenience?

With one train a day each way [out of Dallas-Fort Worth] right now, you won't attract many business travelers. You must have multiple frequencies with dependable, on-time service. In Texas today, I see the bulk of Amtrak travelers as students, seniors, vacationers and those who don't or won't fly. Amtrak accommodates lots of passengers with mobility issues who can't fly or take a bus.

Have you seen the proposal for the Cotton Belt commuter line across North Dallas and the northern suburbs? Do you think it can get off the ground by relying on private money?

I applaud those who are putting together a unique plan to finance the Cotton Belt line. The right of way is there, and that's a big cost savings. If the cities along the route and the council of governments can make it attractive for a private investor, it will be the model for other regions around the country.

Do you foresee the day when DART rail is as much a part of the commuting life in Dallas as it is in major Eastern cities today?

We already have one of the largest light-rail systems in the U.S., and when you throw the TRE and Denton's A Train into the mix, along with future DART airport connections and TexRail in Tarrant County, rail is already the choice for tens of thousands each day. By adding connectivity, it makes it more convenient to use rail as one of your travel options.

This Q&A was conducted and condensed by Dallas Morning News editorial writer Rodger Jones. His email address is rmjones@dallasnews.com. Peter LeCody's email address is peter@texasrailadvocates.org.

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