

Advocates believe time finally right for rail

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Columbus- A little-noticed state commission believes it has a way for commuters to beat congestion, high gas prices and global warming all at once: Take a train.

A regional high-speed rail system - called the Ohio Hub - would also save millions spent building and fixing roads each year.

So why, after 10 years in the works, is such a useful idea still on the drawing board?

A tangled web of environmental rules, property issues, turf battles and the hefty price tag of \$3.8 billion could help explain it.

But that soon may change, said Don Damron, a planner for the Ohio Rail Development Commission. A recent economic study commissioned by the panel found that such a system could draw 9.3 million passengers a year by 2025.

Freight and passenger trains from hubs in Columbus, Cleveland and Toledo would link to other stops throughout Ohio and in nearby states.

Evidence is also strong that the system could make enough from fares to pay its own bills.

"I absolutely believe that the stars are aligning and we have a perfect storm of a transportation crisis on our hands to make this happen," Damron said. "That's in addition to the global warming and other environmental issues, as well as thinking about what kind of cities we want to build for our children."

Gov. Ted Strickland's staff has been briefed on the proposal and Strickland supports seeking federal money to take the next step, spokesman Keith Dailey said Wednesday. In his 2006 campaign, Strickland supported expanding Ohio's rail resources to help the economy, but he is not yet convinced the Ohio Hub plan is feasible, Dailey said.

The vision is ambitious.

Some 1,200 miles of track - some crossing state lines - would whisk 110-mph trains filled with passengers from Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland, Toledo and Lima to in-state and out-of-state destinations.

Privately owned railroad companies would have to buy in, and let the state develop and use their property for a price. Federal and state money would need to flow, and a host of approvals would have to be secured.

Also, attracting the highest number of passengers projected by the rail commission would require offering high-speed trains - rather than traditional 79-mph ones, Damron said. It would also require trains to look nice, run at least six times a day beginning at 6:30 a.m., and to be on time.

Damron's uncle was in the petroleum business. The older man was predicting years ago that oil production would reach its peak around this time, Damron said, and those projections are now coming true.

"I remember thinking, wow, that will be around the time this project will be ready to go, so the timing will be perfect," he said. If approved, the first rail line - running from Cincinnati to Cleveland through Columbus - could be operating within about seven years, he said.

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