

Off track

Where does Texas' bid for high-speed rail stand now?

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If you've ever wondered what the price of noisy partisanship among our state leaders is for average Texans, here's an educated guess: billions of dollars lost. And that's just the cost of missing out on federal funding for a single, albeit massive project.

Texans recently learned that we missed out almost completely on federal funding for high-speed intercity rail. The nation's second most populous state was shut out, for all practical purposes, in the latest round of competition for dollars that will create the nation's 21st-century transportation future the way creation of the interstate highway system shaped the 20th century. There may be other rounds of funding to come; but given the red-ink-drenched condition of the federal budget, who knows when or how much?

According to Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, Texas was all but blanked in the race for \$8 billion in federal stimulus money for high-speed rail for one simple and, we think, unforgivable reason: Our leaders couldn't get their act together.

"If Texas had had its act together, it would have gotten some high-speed rail money," LaHood said Wednesday in Washington. In all, 31 states took a share of the \$8 billion in stimulus money designated by the Obama administration for high-speed intercity rail. Florida led the way, receiving \$1.2 billion. Texas came away with a small-potatoes \$4 million grant for planning in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

The difference between Florida and Texas? The political leadership in the Sunshine State had their ducks in a row, LaHood says. They were unified across party lines at the local, state and federal levels. They had a specific plan. They were "shovel-ready."

Texas Department of Transportation spokesman Chris Lippincott stated the obvious: Texas needs to have more plans in that "shovel-ready" shape. Lippincott says the near shutout in federal funding was "not a surprise."

It certainly surprised us. We had assumed that Texas' business of making its case before the federal bureaucracy was being handled capably and almost routinely. That was the impression given on a visit here awhile back by members of the Texas High-Speed Rail Authority, a nonprofit group composed mostly of former public officeholders.

On the merits, Texas has an utterly compelling case for high-speed rail connecting Houston with Dallas-Fort Worth and the Austin-San Antonio area. That is what makes this failure to lead, to get organized, however you want to describe it, such a vexation.

Call it what you will — Texas Triangle, Texas T-bone —the state's proposed high-speed intercity rail line is the proverbial no-brainer. It would connect three of the nation's 10 largest cities, serving an area bounded by Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth and San Antonio that is projected by the state demographer to have a population of 40 million by the year 2040. It would ease already intolerable congestion on Interstate 35 between the Dallas area and San Antonio. And, unlike other projects, notably the one proposed in California, it would be reasonable to build on gently rolling Texas farm and ranch land that is, by comparison with most other corridors, reasonably priced.

What's not to like about such a plan? And why, for heaven's sake, weren't its praises being sung to the heavens before the Washington decision-makers?

Two important things have caused Texas grief in Washington, according to Harris County Judge Ed Emmett, who has spent most of his professional life dealing with transportation issues at the county, state, national and international levels. Emmett says:

- The lack of a direct connection between Dallas and Houston in the proposed Texas T-bone route has caused many involved at the federal level to question whether Texas is really serious about high-speed rail. The T-bone would route Dallas-bound trains through Central Texas rather than on a straighter line farther east. Backers say it would save hundreds of millions in trackage costs. But Emmett says it also sends a wrong signal, and he backs pushing ahead with a direct Houston-Dallas line. Such a line is one of the three top-rated lines nationwide, the county judge notes. It should be the priority for Texas.

The state's ••interests would be best served by a formal government voice . Such a voice, says Emmett, would communicate a level of seriousness and commitment that is clearly needed in Washington.

The county judge makes two good points — especially about the need to make a direct Houston-Dallas route the priority. This got muddied up by the Texas T-bone plan, well-intentioned as it was. It must be made clear: Direct service between the state's two largest population centers comes first.

But LaHood , a former Republican congressman from Illinois, makes another point: It was also the plague of extreme partisanship that killed Texas in this round of high-speed rail funding.

Alas, Houstonians know all about that. We have seen, up close and personal, the harm that can come from being sharply divided in pursuing federal transit funding. Feuding about light rail cost this region decades in time lost and millions in federal funding.

Thanks largely to the mischief of former Sugar Land Congressman Tom DeLay, the city and the region became a laughingstock when it came to transit. DeLay actually took perverse pride in helping Dallas with transit while blocking funding for light rail here.

We don't want a repeat of that sorry situation statewide. So let's have some explanations, please, starting with the high-speed rail authority and continuing with TxDOT. The train for federal funding of high-speed rail has left the station, and Texas missed it. Why? And how do we get into the running to bring this necessary service to an ever more populated state?