

State's funds for rail study in doubt

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The federal government recently announced it is giving \$1 million to Arizona to launch a study of proposed new passenger rail service between Phoenix and Tucson, but whether the state can come up with a matching \$1 million is a question mark.

The odds appear even slimmer against the state coming up with the projected \$600 million cost to actually launch the rail service between the state's two most populous cities, at least in the near future.

That's because Arizona faces yet another budget crunch and because a sweeping measure to finance transportation systems never made it on the state's Nov. 4 general-election ballot.

"There's no committed funds at this time, but it's something the agency is actively investigating," Arizona Department of Transportation spokesman Timothy Tait said of the money needed for the study.

State officials plan to confer with Maricopa County and Pima County regional planning officials to discuss possible funding for the study, Tait said.

"It may be a joint effort," he said.

The U.S. Department of Transportation announced the \$1 million grant award for starting an environmental impact statement on so-called "Sun Corridor" service that would generally follow the Union Pacific's existing freight tracks.

Central and southern Arizona are becoming increasingly urbanized with development of former agricultural and desert areas around and between Phoenix and Tucson.

Most travel between the two cities is by auto on Interstate 10, but that route is increasingly congested by regional and long-distance traffic despite widening projects.

Whether the UP rail route between Phoenix and Tucson would be available for use by passenger trains is questionable.

The rail route includes UP's Phoenix branch, which splits off from a UP main line near Eloy in Pinal County before going through Tempe and other southeastern suburbs. The main line is crowded with trains carrying freight from California ports, and the railroad says it needs its Phoenix branch to deliver freight to business customers.

According to a description of the Arizona project, it could include upgrading existing

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track and building new track either in current or along new corridors, with as many as 15 new stations and improvements of numerous grade crossings.

Implementation costs are estimated at \$600 million plus \$34 million annually for operations.

The transportation funding initiative supported by Gov. Janet Napolitano and business leaders envisioned new intercity rail service along with highway construction and transit improvements.

But that proposal's funding stream disappeared when an initiative measure for a 1-cent increase in the state sales tax didn't qualify for the ballot because of a lack of valid voter signatures on petitions.

Tait said the department has identified the intercity rail as an important element of Arizona's future transportation system.

"Even when times are tough, we can't lose our ability to focus on the future," he said. "We know the needs aren't going away."

It's up to policymakers to decide where the money would come from, he added.

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