

W. Valley stakeholders discuss possibility of commuter trains

by *Cecilia Chan* - Nov. 12, 2009 10:38 AM
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Commuter trains on freight tracks that run along Grand Avenue, between downtown Phoenix and Wittmann, could ferry up to 2,830 passengers a day by 2030, a consultant forecasts.

And most riders would board the trains from Glendale's and Surprise's downtowns, according to a presentation Monday to the Grand Avenue Coalition. The group of stakeholders, including Surprise, Maricopa County and Arizona Department of Transportation, met at the Rio Vista Recreation Center in Peoria.

"We all want this to happen," said Peoria City Councilman Ron Aames, who chaired the meeting. "(Grand Avenue) has been stagnant much too long."

Aames said a passenger rail would help relieve traffic congestion, spur economic development along the rundown Grand Avenue corridor and improve the freight tracks.

As the West Valley plays catch up with its transportation needs, metropolitan Phoenix is expected to continue its urban sprawl toward Hassayampa and Hidden valleys when the economy improves, according to Rick Pilgrim, senior vice president of URS Corp.

The Maricopa Association of Governments hired the company to do a commuter rail study of the Grand Avenue corridor that will be completed by the end of the year.

Growth brings pressure to solve the transportation issues in the region, Pilgrim said. A commuter rail on Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway tracks should be viewed as one tool to handle transportation needs, he added.

Although there is no money now to build a commuter rail, stakeholders need to promote the Grand Avenue corridor as the favored route for the first commuter line in the Phoenix metro area, Peoria City Manager Carl Swenson said.

The Valley has four other potential commuter rail corridors, including one that goes to Chandler and one into northern Pinal County. Supporters envision commuter rail will link to other modes of transportation such as light rail and buses.

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Kevin Wallace, MAG transit program manager, said his agency is finishing two other feasibility studies by the end of the year: commuter rail on the Union Pacific rail line from either Tempe or Phoenix to Buckeye and an overall look at commuter rail options for the region. The options study will establish priorities for implementing commuter rail service based on such factors as ridership potential and costs.

The projected daily commuter use of a Grand Avenue line is slightly higher than the national average.

"We are thinking about regional solutions to our transportation problems," said LaTonya Finch, BNSF's regional manager of economic development.

"I think as we continue down this path we are on we need to think about land use," Finch said. "We need to focus and make this corridor an economic development generator."

Finch said the tracks in the area have been on the ground for 125 years and stakeholders are obligated to design a rail system that is effective for another 125 years.

A big obstacle, however, is funding. Commuter rail is not part of Proposition 400, a continuation of a half-cent sales tax to fund transportation projects.

The consultant, in a preliminary look at capital costs, estimated that the first mile near downtown Phoenix would be the hardest to do and the most expensive. Big ticket items included relocating railroad tracks, purchasing passenger trains and establishing quiet zones. The initial assessment is that Grand Avenue falls in the upper third of the national average for commuter rail per-mile capital costs.

"We have some challenges," said Finch, a former Surprise Community Development director. "There is no public funding mechanism here like in other regions."

Surprise City Councilman Skip Hall asked about the projected cost of operation per mile for a commuter rail. Pilgrim responded the average was \$25 per train mile and that 40 percent to 45 percent of the cost is recovered from fares. The return is almost double that of light rail, which recovers around 25 percent of its operation cost from fares.

Aames proposed forming a committee to seek possible funding sources. The group is

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expected to meet again in February.

Commuter rail

The daily ridership projected for 2030 is 2,830. The trip from Phoenix to Wittmann would take 42 minutes.

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