

Phoenix joins cities in push for bullet trains

by *Sean Holstege* - Dec. 10, 2009 12:00 AM
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Planners for five key Western cities, including Phoenix, said Wednesday that they will seek \$50 million from Congress in the next transportation bill to study the feasibility of a high-speed passenger-rail network.

The coalition, which includes regional governments in Las Vegas, Denver, Salt Lake City and Reno, will lobby Washington on the benefits of linking the cities with rapid intercity trains. Their action comes as the federal government considers where it will invest \$8 billion in stimulus money for high-speed rail. The Obama administration set aside the money this year and considers the initiative a critical investment for the nation's economy.

Trains traveling as fast at 225 mph are envisioned as a convenient alternative to congested freeways and airports for people traveling between cities. Business travelers make up a sizable portion of passengers in other countries, and in many places, short-hop air travel has all but vanished.

Currently, Las Vegas is the only Western city that appears on a U.S. Department of Transportation strategic map for high-speed rail, and only for a link with Los Angeles.

But the coalition, the Western High Speed Rail Alliance, believes the entire growing Intermountain West is a good place to lay track for the fast-moving trains, which could haul passengers from Phoenix to Los Angeles or Las Vegas in less than three hours.

"This alliance was created to be part of the discussion. . . . The Intermountain West will not be left out," said Tom Skancke, director of the non-profit.

Competition for high-speed rail money is fierce. As many as 40 states requested grants. After the stimulus money runs out, applicants are hoping to turn to the next federal transportation bill for funding help.

The last transportation bill expired in September and isn't expected to be reauthorized before 2011, but some proposals call for spending \$4 billion a year to expand Obama's initiative.

Leading candidates to receive stimulus money are California, the Great Lakes and

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the Northeast. Coalition members hope, however, that congressional appropriations will put Western cities on the rail map. "We want to be treated like everybody else. This is a game-changer for Phoenix, economically," said Dennis Smith, executive director of the Maricopa Association of Governments, another member of the coalition.

The United States is decades behind Europe, Japan and China in high-speed rail.

Experts here are divided on the benefits of such a system in the U.S.

Last month at a national infrastructure conference in Phoenix, European financial analysts pegged the cost of a national network at \$400 billion. They said very few routes made enough financial sense.

But some independent researchers and numerous high-speed-rail advocates highlight the Phoenix-Los Angeles route as one of the most viable in the country.

The coalition believes its funding request will cover the cost of detailed planning for a network.

Skanche is optimistic the Western alliance effort will get some political support because

the states are home to key politicians: Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada, who backs a regional rail network; Senate Minority Whip Jon Kyl of Arizona; and House members on the transportation and appropriations panels.

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