

Zip Rail backers make their case in Washington, D.C.

Tauren Dyson, news@postbulletin.com | Posted: Friday, April 24, 2015 9:54 am



The United States High Speed Rail Association hosted a three-day conference in Washington, D.C., where groups from around the country converged to outline plans for high-speed rail projects. One was the North American High Speed Rail Group, which says it hopes to build the Zip Rail between Rochester and the Twin Cities.

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The private group proposing to finance the Zip Rail project met on Wednesday to lay out the latest plans to bring high-speed rail to Rochester.

The United States High Speed Rail Association hosted a three-day conference in Washington, D.C., where groups from around the country converged to outline plans for high-speed rail projects. One was the North American High Speed Rail Group, which says it hopes to build the Zip Rail between Rochester and the Twin Cities.

Along with Olmsted County rail adviser Chuck Michael and NAHSRG Chief Strategy Officer Wendy Medley, Olmsted County Commissioner Ken Brown discussed the objectives for and motivation behind building a high-speed train from the Twin Cities to Rochester.

"The question on everybody's mind is, 'Why the hell a high-speed connector?'" Brown said.

With the capability to travel up to 225 mph, the Zip Rail would better serve people who work in Rochester by cutting commute times, Brown explained.

Specifically, he pointed to the more than 34,000 workers at Mayo Clinic in Rochester who could benefit from high-speed rail service, and the plans to expand the medical center, which ultimately could double that number. The increase in employees at the facility could lead to a glut of cars on the U.S. 52 corridor, and Brown said the Zip Rail will help alleviate that traffic.

"Mayo needs access to people," Brown said. "They are intent on growing their business."

Brown said Rochester sees more than 3 million visitors annually, and the rail could reduce existing travel times.

Today, the trip between the Twin Cities and Rochester via automobile, bus or shuttle is about 90 minutes. In the future, Brown said the Zip Rail would cut that trip in half.

"The noninduced riders, the people that have to get to work, that is a base you can count on," Brown said.

Overall, 40,000 people commute to Rochester daily, many of whom originate from the Twin Cities, to work at many of the city's 110,000 jobs. Yet, no direct train service connects the Twin Cities and Rochester.

Bring in employees

"We're short on employees. We have more jobs than we have people," Michael said. "We statistically will merge the labor markets of Rochester and the Twin Cities. We need to get access to the larger labor market."

Michael said building the high-speed rail would help manage growth in the area, specifically at Mayo. He anticipates the number of daily patient visits to double from 10,000 to 20,000 after the medical center expands.

Michael said it would connect in Minneapolis either at the International Airport or the Mall of America on the north end and at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester on the south end. To cut down on costs, the point-to-point system from the Twin Cities to Rochester would offer no intermediate stops.

About a month ago, North American made its plans known to build the line. While organizers continue to follow the proposal guidelines for federal funding, they insist only private money will support the rail project, which is said to have a price tag between \$2 billion and \$4 billion. Whoever provides those private funds also will design, build, operate, maintain and own the project.

"On an operational basis, it requires no subsidy," Brown said.

"We're not interested in federal funding," Medley said. "We're not requesting their money."

Investor details not available

Brown, Michael and Medley declined to share details on who will fund the project moving forward and what companies they are negotiating with.

"Once we have a position in the corridor where the state of Minnesota says that we have the rights to develop the corridor, at that point in time, we'll be able to share more about the economics behind it, including investors," Medley said.

Medley said, so far, Olmsted County has put forth \$2 million in viability studies for the project. Once it secures private funds, North American will undergo its own engineering feasibility tests.

As of today, the group has narrowed down the number of possible route combinations for the Zip Rail from 1,200 to eight.

Also, Medley shot down any connection between the Zip Rail and the potential for World's Fair coming to Minnesota, even as North American attempts to win a bid to bring the event to the state in 2023. Planners anticipate a target completion year of 2022 for the Zip Rail project.

Eventually, 70,000 commuters

In the end, rail supporters say growth in the area is what has spurred the need for a high-speed rail. Rochester is the fastest growing city in Minnesota, and Michael anticipates 70,000 daily commuters in coming years. He said building a high-speed rail line will help contain the inevitable swell of traffic during that time.

He said the Zip Rail ultimately would reduce the need for structured parking requirements in Rochester, which could cost.

"We love the people, but we really don't need their cars," Michael said. "We figure we could spend \$500 million on structured parking and still be short."

If the Zip Rail is built, it would be one leg on the Midwest Regional Initiative, a web of high-speed rail lines that would connect in cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, St. Louis and Pittsburgh. The Midwest High Speed Rail website says a 200 mph passenger line from Chicago to Minneapolis via Rochester is estimated to cost \$7 billion, according to the Southeast Minnesota Rail Alliance's study.