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New study the first step toward Hempstead rail line

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Proponents of establishing Houston's first commuter rail line along U.S. 290 to Hempstead have hired someone to take their idea and turn it into a plan.

The nine-month study will identify how many riders are likely to use the 40-mile line, where to put the stations and where in Hempstead to put the terminus.

With the document details in hand, the Gulf Coast Rail District intends to ask the federal government for money to help build it.

"This is an enormous step in the right direction toward bringing commuter rail to our region," said Mark Ellis, chairman of the district's board.

The Houston-based engineering firm Klotz Associates will do the \$715,000 study. The Gulf Coast Rail District got the money from federal stimulus funds.

The line as presently envisioned would start somewhere near the junction of U.S. 290 and Loop 610 and head north along an existing freight rail line.

Such a line would not carry any commuter trains for perhaps five years, the time needed to complete studies, financing and construction.

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The study begins a laborious process of planning what the Houston-Galveston Area Council estimated would be a \$348 million project.

The launch of the study is a milestone, said Harris County Judge Ed Emmett, who is not a formal participant in the planning but has promoted it the commuter line as vital to the region.

"It's a real step as opposed to people just talking about it, and real money is being spent to get this process moving," Emmett said.

Metro part of equation

Part of the Klotz work is to determine whether what is known as the Eureka corridor line is a viable option. Ellis believes it will be.

The working idea is that commuter trains would use the rail by day and freight would flow at night. Those details would have to be negotiated with Union Pacific, which owns and uses the tracks.

The Gulf Coast Rail District would also need to strike a deal with the Metropolitan Transit Authority because the commuter rail line alone will not complete most commutes.

Passengers delivered to the Northwest Transit Center near U.S. 290 and Loop 610 will need quick passage to downtown and other

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'Perfectly suited'

Just this week, Houston Mayor Annise Parker called into question whether Metro has the money to build the Uptown light rail line that would connect the Northwest Transit Center to the metropolitan light rail system.

The three-year-old Rail District brings together Harris, Fort Bend, Galveston and Waller counties, the city of Houston and several small cities to take a regional approach to train travel.

"Pretty much everyone involved agrees this corridor is perfectly suited for commuter rail," Emmett said.

The Hempstead line aims to ease traffic congestion along U.S. 290, one of the region's most crowded freeways.

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