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Northwest Freeway Rail Plans May Be Costly

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PATTIE SHIEH
Reporter

HOUSTON - It's just you and 275,000 of your friends and neighbors crowding on to the Northwest Freeway every day.

Sure, you know it's a pain. But, even though you sit in traffic for hours every week, do you really know how bad it is?

Well, there is good news. There is a new player at the planning table with an option that might work for the short term.

Four accidents happen every day on 290 between Hempstead and 610. Every other day, the accident is a major one. Cody Estes knows all too well what that means.

He deals with the stop and goes all the way to Cypress.

"If an accident happens then everybody on the road is rubbernecking," Estes said. "That's why the rush hour often stretches to four hours."

"I've considered three different routes coming to work and going home and that's traffic either way I go. So, I'm just kind of stuck out," describes Chris Phillips as he commutes back and forth to his work, Fast Signs.

To ease congestion on the 38 mile corridor will take \$4.6 billion. There are lots of plans in the works, but all of them require one thing that's hard to find these days.

Money.

"Right now, nobody has the money to do any of these things. But, everybody says this is the top priority corridor in our area," says Harris County Judge Ed Emmett.

He knows the solution is multi-faceted. That means dealing with capacity.

But the Texas Department of Transportation is delayed on construction. Another oft mentioned option is creating managed lanes. Many believe the Hempstead Tollway is the answer.

But, that has run into design issues that seem difficult to solve.

"It's not dominated by freight trains. So, we could easily fit passenger trains into that corridor," explains Maureen Crocker with the Gulf Coast Rail District.

She explains why commuter rail along existing railroad tracks is a good solution.

It's helped by the fact that Union Pacific is willing to be part of the conversation. While right of way still must be

acquired, the scenario might be easier when dealing with one company than dozens of private home or business owners.

Crocker points out, "This is a new option and in that sense makes it much more viable for the near term because the tracks are already there. We wouldn't have to displace anyone to get the right of way and we could start running trains pretty quickly within 5 years."

The funding challenge remains. For commuter rail, the cost is \$350 million.

That's capital cost only. It does not include construction, operation or obtaining the right of ways.