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## County, Metro are ready to move on commuter rail

Study ranks U.S. 290 route as a key component

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The push for commuter rail service along U.S. 290 received a boost recently with the release of a study that ranks that rail corridor as a key component of a regional commuter rail system.

Harris County and Metropolitan Transit Authority officials said they are ready to get moving on a U.S. 290 commuter rail project. Union Pacific Railroad officials said they are open to the idea and will continue discussions with those entities.

Union Pacific owns the north-south "Eureka" railroad corridor that runs along U.S. 290 and Hempstead Highway to the Eureka junction at the crossroads of Hempstead Highway and Old Katy Road near Interstate 10.

"That line is probably the most viable of our two north-south lines that connect Houston with Dallas," said Joe Adams, spokesman for Union Pacific Railroad. "Our Hardy rail line is more heavily used than the 290 line. We feel that with proper investment in infrastructure to accommodate both commuter and freight rail cars, the 290 commuter project is feasible."

The Houston-Galveston Area Council's draft Regional Commuter Rail Connectivity Study, which was released June 13, pinpointed five

existing railroad corridors that could form the "baseline system" for a commuter rail network in the Houston-Galveston region: U.S. 290 (UPRR's Eureka line), Texas 249 to Tomball (Burlington Northern Santa Fe's Houston line), Texas 3 (UPRR's Galveston line), South Fort Bend/FM 521 (BNSF's Galveston/Popp corridor line), and the Texas 35 Tollway corridor to Pearland (near UPRR's Mykawa line).


"It is believed that the system will be constructed in individual corridors as funding becomes available," said Earl Washington, a senior transportation planner with the Houston-Galveston Area Council and project manager on the study. "Ideally, each corridor would initially function independently and later function as part of an overall system."

The study team also identified several potential locations for the hub terminal and maintenance facility, including the Northwest Mall area, Northwest Transit Center, Eureka rail yard, Hardy rail yard and Old South rail yard.

The study concluded a long-distance commuter rail system can provide an important part of the future transit network the Houston-Galveston region will require as more people move into the metropolitan area, Washington said. The study also indicates that a long-distance rail system is feasible to develop in the proposed corridors.

Washington said the U.S. 290 corridor came out on top, first or second, among the five "principal" rail corridors analyzed in the study. The Regional Commuter Rail Connectivity Study team conducted an in-depth evaluation on each of

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those corridors, U.S. 290, the Hardy Toll Road, Westpark, Interstate 45 south and U.S. 90, to determine the most feasible railroad corridors in the region for commuter rail implementation in conjunction with freight rail service.

Texas 249 was not one of those five, but was included at a later date when the study team discovered that a commuter rail system on that corridor would not take away from the U.S. 290 corridor's potential ridership.

Washington said the study is step one in the planning process required for all major infrastructure projects. The study, which is out for public comment until July 31, is a planning tool only, he said.

"It will serve as a foundation for those agencies that could move forward with commuter rail projects," Washington said. "They would perform alternatives analyses, environmental studies, preliminary and design engineering and construction."

Harris County Judge Ed Emmett announced recently he would spearhead the effort get a U.S. 290 commuter rail system operational in the next two-three years.

Joe Stinebaker, Emmett's spokesman, said Emmett was scheduling meetings with all parties that could be involved in a 290 commuter rail project, including Metro, UPRR, the Texas Department of Transportation, city of Houston and Harris County.

"He said it has been studied, now let's move

forward and get something done," Stinebaker said.

In these discussions, they will hammer out the details, such as who will build it, operate it and fund it, said Stinebaker. The parameters of the project will also be set.

The commuter rail study suggested the U.S. 290 system would run at least to the edge of H-GAC's regional border with Grimes County, through the Cy-Fair area, outer and inner Beltway 8 and along Hempstead Highway between north Spring Branch and U.S. 290-bordered residential and commercial areas to Metro's Northwest Transit Center. From that point, the system would tie into the future Uptown Galleria light-rail line, and Metro's bus system could take over to transport riders to locations throughout Houston's various business and commercial centers.

A direct rail connection into downtown would have to be worked out in the future, as right-of-way inside Loop 610 is tight, and many entities have laid claim to it for various projects.

In February, a Metro project team launched discussions with TxDOT about building a commuter rail line on Hempstead Highway in time to provide relief for commuters when a massive reconstruction project gets under way in the U.S. 290 corridor in the next three to four years.

Parts of that road project may be delayed because of TxDOT's recent budget and funding challenges, but specifics will not be known until the Texas Legislature meets to discuss funding

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