High-speed rail plan needs funding

Stimulus money sought for route that would connect Upstate, Charlotte, Atlanta

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SENECA — South Carolina and Georgia are teaming up to tap federal stimulus money to launch a high-speed rail project that would include the Upstate.

The states are seeking money for a critical environmental impact study of the rail route

Roy Tolson, a rail coordinator for the South Carolina Department of Transportation, said the joint application with Georgia was filed July 17 and seeks $55 million.

The money also would go toward a study on how many passengers would ride a high-speed rail system linking Charlotte and Macon, Ga., by way of Greenville, Clemson and Atlanta.

A feasibility study of the Charlotte to Macon route of the Southeast High Speed Corridor examined building a corridor to handle train speeds between 90 and 200 mph. At the high-end speed, such a system would cost approximately $3.4 billion to build and $60 million annually to operate.

Tolson said the federal government is making available $8 billion in stimulus money for states pursuing high-speed rail.

In April, President Obama rolled out an ambitious $13 billion plan for passenger rail improvements. Although Obama's initiative was not framed with the urgency of President John F. Kennedy's challenge to the nation in 1961 of putting a man on the moon, David Foster, project manager for the high-speed corridor at the North Carolina DOT, said it's a start.

"It's tremendously important to have a funding partner for rail as we do for highway and air travel," Foster said. "We have another tool in the tool box."

Tolson said getting money to proceed with the new round of studies is important.

"You have to go through steps to apply for additional money," he said. "As you go through each step it brings you closer to the reality of getting something constructed.

Tolson said approximately 40 states submitted pre-applications to the Federal Rail Administration for stimulus money. He said the FRA is currently reviewing the pre-applications and contacting states to go over them. If accepted, the applications would have to be resubmitted by Oct. 2.