

I-85 rail idea picks up speed

Study: system economically feasible option

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SENECA — A new tri-state Department of Transportation (DOT) study concludes it would be economically feasible to establish a high-speed rail system along the Interstate 85 corridor between Charlotte, N.C. and Macon, Ga.

The recently released feasibility study concludes that passenger trains traveling at speeds of 150 mph southward from Charlotte, with projected stops at Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport and Clemson, among others, would attract more than 1 million passengers by 2025.

The study is an extension of a high-speed rail option idea that has been kicked around for years connecting Virginia and Charlotte.

Such a rapid-rail system, aside from the obvious benefits of potentially reducing the number of vehicles on the highways and cutting back on gasoline consumption, could also give the Upstate, including Oconee County, an economic-development shot in the arm.

Among other things, having travelers buzzing through the Interstate 85 corridor by train could induce more motels and hotels to open along the rails' I-85 route and help local tourism by bringing more visitors to the area.

ALL ABOARD

The Charlotte-Macon Southeast High Speed Rail Corridor study assesses the capacity and speed capabilities of the corridor and estimates the number of passengers, revenue, operating and capital costs associated with a extending high-speed passenger rail from Charlotte to Macon along I-85. The report addresses the feasibility of train speeds up to 150 mph, including new track construction in locations that would increase speeds and avoid congested areas.

Cambridge, Mass.-based Volpe National Transportation Systems Center, which is part of the United States DOT's Research and Innovative Technology Administration, conducted the study.

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Oconee County Councilman Joel Thrift, who chairs the council's Transportation Committee, thinks high-speed rail is the way to go in the future. "I would love to see it come through Oconee County. It sounds like a state and federal project, but I certainly hope we have a little influence and input for it to come through Oconee too."

From a business point of view, Thrift would like to see such a high-speed rail system be used to have cheaper freight transportation. He also would like to see the government look into privatizing such a venture a little to keep the costs down.

Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia are working together with the business communities in each state to plan, develop and implement a high-speed rail in the Southeast. If implemented, the system would be developed in stages and would include upgrading existing rail right of way where possible.

\$3.4 BILLION VENTURE

Such an undertaking won't

come cheap. Exclusive passenger rails, which would separate them from any freight rails to avoid collisions, have to be constructed. For a 150 mph to 200 mph speed-rail system, capital construction is estimated at \$3.4 billion, according to the Volpe study. The report estimates it would cost about \$60 million annually to operate and maintain the 150 mph system.

Through projected ridership increases, the study predicts a break-even year by 2031.

South Carolina Transportation Secretary H.B. "Buck" Limehouse said the Southeast corridor is recognized as one of the top mega-regions of the nation.

"We absolutely must be planning ways to connect it with our neighbors to the northeast in energy-responsible ways," Limehouse said in a statement. This analysis helps to better position ourselves for (a) high-speed rail should sufficient funding be appropriated."

The complete study can be viewed at <http://www.sehsr.org>.