

February 21, 2011

L.A.-Indio rail expansion plan gaining steam

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The Desert Sun

For the past 20 years, local leaders have talked about linking the Coachella Valley to Los Angeles with better passenger rail service. But without money, the idea never really gained steam.

Thanks to new political developments at the federal and local levels, the push for expanded rail service in the valley is gaining momentum, even with the economic downturn and, as always, the scarcity of money.

“There's just a lot of moving parts to this to make sure this comes together,” said Cathedral City City Councilman Greg Pettis, who became chair of the Riverside County Transportation Commission this year.

“We're trying to take this in deliberate, determined steps,” he said.

In a strong show of regional support, the commission's board of elected leaders voted unanimously this month to approve a resolution that backs Amtrak's federally funded efforts to upgrade its under-performing Sunset Limited passenger line from three days a week to daily service.

The nearly 2,000-mile line, which runs from New Orleans to Los Angeles, is presently the valley's only option for passenger rail.

The train stops at a sparsely appointed, windswept station in north Palm Springs, picking up westbound passengers around 5 a.m., and eastbound passengers around 5:15 p.m., on Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Local rail advocates say daily service on the Sunset Limited would be a first step to creating a 141-mile regional passenger line with stops from Indio to Los Angeles.

“If we could have that as a daily train, it could certainly complement our regional, corridor train,” said Robert Manning, president of Palm Springs-based Southwest Rail Passenger Association.

Better rail service has long been touted as a potential boost to valley tourism, a headache-free alternative to Southern California's congested freeways. Advocates say rail would deliver more people to desert casinos, hotels and restaurants.

Rail also has enjoyed renewed interest on the federal level, under the Obama administration. Last week, Vice President Joe Biden announced a plan to spend

\$53 billion on a new high-speed passenger rail system over the next six years.

But despite the recent enthusiasm, expanded rail service in the Coachella Valley won't be easy or cheap.

For months, Amtrak has been locked in negotiations with railroad operator Union Pacific over the costs to make the Sunset Limited a daily service. Union Pacific owns most of the track used by the Sunset Limited. It's required by law to give Amtrak use of the track.

Neither party would go into detail on the negotiations, but the cost estimates floated to upgrade the entire route for regular passenger service are "substantial," Amtrak spokesperson Vernae Graham said in an e-mail.

Union Pacific proposed a \$700 million price tag, according to an October 2010 report by Coachella Valley Association of Governments Deputy Director Allyn Waggle.

"This is an unrealistic number and very likely intended to try to kill the idea of daily passenger rail service, and maybe even the existing three-days-a-week service," Waggle's report stated.

Without the upgrade, recent changes to federal law could force the Sunset Limited to shut down entirely.

"The \$700 million in upgrades is to scare everybody," Pettis added. He and other rail advocates say Union Pacific aim to keep the tracks available for freight shipments.

Union Pacific spokesman Aaron Hunt declined to respond directly to those concerns.

"The only thing I can confirm is that the discussions regarding the Sunset Limited are ongoing," Hunt said in an e-mail Friday. It's not clear when they'll wrap and neither side is saying what the "upgrades" would entail.

Meanwhile, Amtrak officials say they're committed to making the Sunset Limited a daily service.

The line saw 16 percent passenger growth from 2009 to 2010, but its three-day service has kept it among Amtrak's least financially performing lines and in danger of being shut down, they say.

Pettis called improved valley passenger rail one of his top priorities as this year's commission chair. He hopes to see the Sunset Limited making daily trips through the desert within 18 months.

When Pettis' term ends at the end of 2011, another valley elected official, Supervisor John Benoit, will replace him as commission chair.

"I've had some interesting discussions about it and it sounds plausible," Benoit said of the daily rail service.

“There are some advantages to the railroad that would make it more reasonable,” Benoit added. “Who knows what the price of oil is going to be in five years? Who can predict what this can be?”

More travel choices

Pettis, Manning and other rail advocates see daily service on the Sunset Limited as just the first step to more travel choices.

The daily service would likely prompt Amtrak to base crew members and equipment in the desert.

Those Amtrak resources, they say, could eventually be used for a 141-mile regional, “inter-city” Indio-to-L.A. line that’s included in the state’s transportation plan. It would pick up passengers daily in densely populated parts of Los Angeles, Riverside and Orange Counties.

There are no firm estimates on the cost of starting such a system, but since it would use existing tracks, it would be substantially less than starting from scratch.

But even then, the cost of leasing or buying trains and new or upgraded stations would be in the millions of dollars.

And with state and local governments paralyzed by overwhelming budget deficits, it’s not clear who would pick up the tab for such an inter-city line.

Once the system got rolling, it would still need to be subsidized. A recent CVAG study put the annual subsidy for one train on the inter-city line at \$2 million, after ticket revenues are taken into account.

Pettis proposed local hotels, casinos, hospitals and other tourism-driven businesses benefiting from the added visitors, pick up that subsidy for at least the first few years.

“It behooves all of these entities to come to the table and participate,” Pettis said, though Benoit and others say they believe businesses have been so battered by the recession that it would be a tough sell.

Pettis said he believed the regional line could launch as early as a year after the Sunset Limited goes daily.

Indio’s legal dispute with a developer over its future transportation center, which would serve as a station for the line, is another challenge.

This week, a Riverside County judge rejected a motion that would have closed the lawsuit by KEB Enterprises against the city. The dispute will now go to trial.

Still, Manning remains optimistic that more valley residents will be using trains to travel in the near future.

“People are flocking to trains. It’s a great way to travel,” Manning said. “It’s environmentally one of the best ways to move people.”

