

By Maggie Behringer

Correspondent

DALTON, Ga. — While Georgia's Department of Transportation has yet to decide between high-speed rail and maglev trains for the long-planned high speed route along Interstate 75, Dalton is preparing for either choice by identifying station sites and necessary infrastructure.

"I think it'll help us get ready for the future," said Zach Montgomery, the Greater Dalton Metropolitan Planning Organization transportation planner. "This is a definite mode of transportation for the future."

The idea of a high-speed passenger rail connecting Atlanta and Chattanooga has been discussed for more than a decade. Currently, GDOT is completing an environmental study and continuing to weigh high speed rail against maglev, or magnetic levitation, trains through presentations by expert consultants.

"The hard part is paying for the infrastructure to get it running and all set up," Mr. Montgomery said.

When completed, Dalton's Atlanta to Chattanooga High Speed Ground Transportation Study will locate the best site for a station along the I-75 corridor. It will outline the infrastructure needed to operate a station and address how the rail would interact with existing modes of transportation.

WHAT'S NEXT

Three public hearings will be held later this year on plans to locate sites for a high-speed or maglev rail station in Dalton.

Mr. Montgomery indicated the three interstate exits that lead directly into the city could be potential locations.

The study will measure traffic counts; accessibility to public transit, bikes and taxis; the presence of parking areas or the cost of building such areas; and the availability of utilities and land.

"It needs to be a hub of all the modes of transportation without adding chaos to the existing interchanges," he explained.

The study also will draw heavily on community opinion. Three open meetings will educate the public on the difference between high speed rail and maglev trains, present the preliminary locations and hear feedback on the options and, finally, review the completed study.

Driven by administrative hours, the study will cost \$15,000. A federal grant will cover 80 percent. Mr. Montgomery estimated the state would contribute roughly \$200. The Metropolitan Planning Organization plans to fund the balance.

He expects to begin the study in early July.

At the most recent state presentation on May 19, Central Japan Railway Co. officials explained their experience testing and operating maglev trains.

Essentially, choosing between the two trains is a matter of cost saving in the short term or the long term, they said. Maglev trains are more expensive to build from scratch, while high-speed rail requires more maintenance.

Last September, GDOT successfully petitioned for a \$13.8 million grant from the Federal Railroad Administration for a maglev study. A local match of \$3.5 million is required to draw down the grant, but so far that money hasn't been put up, officials have said.

According to Mr. Montgomery, state officials are not releasing figures related to the cost of building, operating and maintaining either option. He added that given the regional and national uses for the transportation system, governments at the local, county, state and federal levels will have to contribute to costs.

Maggie Behringer writes about Dalton and Whitfield County. Contact her at maggie.behringer@gmail.com.