

Wyo rail study hangs on Colorado decisions

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CHEYENNE -- Wyoming transportation officials are waiting for Colorado to determine what kind of trains it intends to run on its planned high-speed rail lines before Wyoming can finish a feasibility study about the prospect of extending the rail service north to Cheyenne.

Colorado, New Mexico and Texas are seeking \$5 million in federal funds to study whether a high-speed rail system from El Paso, Texas, north to Denver would be viable.

The Wyoming Legislature two years ago funded a quarter-million-dollar study looking into whether such a high-speed rail system could extend as far north as Casper.

Sen. Michael Von Flatern, R-Gillette, said Thursday that the Wyoming study already has determined that extending service as far north as Cheyenne would make sense, but as a practical matter, it couldn't go farther north.

Von Flatern, chairman of the Senate Transportation, Highways and Military Affairs Committee, said the terrain north of Cheyenne is too difficult and coal train traffic on existing lines is too heavy to allow high speed passenger service as far north as Casper. He said construction of new lines would be necessary but the cost can't be justified.

"With under \$10-a-gallon gasoline, with these economics, this population, it just doesn't make sense," Von Flatern said.

Dan Kline, supervisor of the Systems Planning and Railroad Unit at the Wyoming Department of Transportation, said he expects the Wyoming study will be completed by late this summer. He said the state needs to hear from Colorado whether it intends to run electric trains and other details before it can complete its study.

"Right now, we're sort of watching the Rocky Mountain Rail Authority, and waiting for them to finalize their decisions on technology and equipment," Kline said.

"We basically don't step ahead on ridership estimates or technology assumptions without them going first," Kline said. "They're obviously the big dog in this thing."

Kline said the state's consultant has been working on other aspects of the study, so work hasn't stopped in the meantime.

David Simpson, a Minnesota consultant, has been directing the Wyoming study. He said the Colorado planning effort is not only looking at north-south service, but is also considering the prospect of rail service along the east-west Interstate 70 corridor that could take people from Denver west to ski areas.

If Colorado decides to use electric trains because of the steeper grades involved in an east-west route, Simpson said it would use the same type of trains in any north-south service that could reach Cheyenne. He said Wyoming can't finish its feasibility study until that decision is made.

Simpson said he sees a reasonable probability that dedicated passenger rail service could be constructed between Cheyenne and Fort Collins, Colo., within the next 10 years.

A nonprofit group called Front Range Commuter Rail has been pushing for development of better passenger rail service in Colorado.

Bob Briggs of the Front Range group said Thursday he expects the Rocky Mountain Rail Authority will announce at a hearing July 24 what sort of trains it intends to use.

"The bottom-line is that we need to connect Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico, and we also need to connect east-west," Briggs said.