

Deal sets train on fast track

The payoff: 4,800 jobs, \$461 million and a quick link from Raleigh to Charlotte

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By: Bruce Sicheloff

After months of wrangling with a reluctant freight railroad, the N.C. Department of Transportation says it has won the agreement it needed to secure \$461 million in federal grants that will put faster, more frequent and more reliable passenger trains on the tracks between Charlotte and Raleigh.

Gene Conti, the state transportation secretary, said DOT will start seeking bids over the next two weeks for contracts to lay tracks, build bridges and buy trains.

The construction is expected to create 4,800 jobs over the next two years and cut the train time from Raleigh to Charlotte below three hours, including seven stops on the way.

"This will significantly improve our passenger service and also, I believe, have benefits for the movement of freight through that corridor" between the state's largest cities, Conti said Monday evening.

The Obama administration promised \$545 million in January 2010 as North Carolina's share of \$8 billion in stimulus funds to start building a national network of high-speed trains. But the Federal Railroad Administration withheld most of the money until it extracted guarantees that taxpayers would get better train service for their investment - and that DOT would not let slow freight trains get in the way.

That meant coming to terms with Norfolk Southern Railway, whose dispatchers control movements of passenger as well as freight trains on the tracks it leases from the state-owned N.C. Railroad. Conti signed the 23-page agreement late Monday with Norfolk Southern, N.C. Railroad and Amtrak.

DOT will spend the money to add 28 miles of double track between Greensboro and Charlotte, plus five miles of passing sidings between Raleigh and Greensboro.

Curves will be straightened so trains can run faster. A dozen new highway bridges will replace crossings where trains sometimes crash into cars; 21 private-road crossings will be closed.

Much of the money will be spent in and near Charlotte. An \$88 million railroad bridge there will replace a downtown crossing where Norfolk Southern and CSX trains now must stop for each other, and it will make room for future local transit trains.

"It connects the two largest cities in the state right across the Piedmont crescent, with faster travel times that have become increasingly competitive with the automobile," said Joe Milazzo II, executive director of the Regional Transportation Alliance, a Triangle business group.

"We're anxious to see these improvements, and certainly to see them shorten the travel time between Raleigh and Charlotte," said Natalie English, a Charlotte Chamber of Commerce senior vice president.

Two Triangle projects worth \$30 million will erect bridges to lift trains over dangerous crossings at Hopson Road in Research Triangle Park and Morrisville Parkway in Morrisville.

DOT will buy more locomotives and passenger cars, and expand its rail yard off Capital Boulevard in Raleigh to make room for them.

Goal: 90 mph at peak

The improvements will cut a projected 13 minutes from travel times between Raleigh and Charlotte because trains will be able to run faster in places where they now are required to slow down. The run time now is three hours 12 minutes.

But it is unclear when the maximum train speeds between Raleigh and Charlotte will be increased to 90 mph, as called for in the state's rail plan. That upgrade could cut another 12 to 15 minutes from travel times.

The legal top speed will stay at 79 mph until the nation's railroads install safety technology called "positive train control," intended to reduce chances of train accidents.

That change is supposed to happen by 2015. But in a stopgap spending bill adopted last week to keep the government running for another three weeks, Congress eliminated at least temporarily a federal appropriation to help railroads pay for the safety technology.

Norfolk Southern's part

Travelers who ride the Amtrak Carolinian from New York to Charlotte now are familiar with frequent delays - especially on clogged CSX freight tracks in Virginia - that can make the train arrive minutes or hours late. The new agreement will hold Norfolk Southern responsible for avoiding similar delays in North Carolina that could keep new and existing trains from arriving on schedule.

Norfolk Southern balked at accepting terms it said might curtail its freight business today or cramp its opportunity to expand over decades to come. The first agreement DOT signed with the railroad in December was rejected as toothless by the Federal Railroad Administration.

The new agreement sets standards Norfolk Southern must meet, measured in minutes of travel delay, to keep the passenger trains on time. It sets guidelines for determining which problems are the freight railroad's responsibility, and steps for getting them fixed. In return, Norfolk Southern gets a voice in future decisions to add trains to the schedule and set their timetables.

Norfolk Southern has a history of hard bargaining.

Bypassing Five Points

When Triangle Transit was developing plans in the 1990s for local rail transit service in the region, Norfolk Southern forced the agency to pledge \$2.6 million for a new side track in Durham County, as a replacement for rusted rails that had not served a freight customer for 20 years.

And last year, when DOT was mapping a proposed high-speed route from Richmond, Va., to downtown Raleigh, Norfolk Southern protested that a path mapped through its yard near Five Points would cause several hundred million dollars in damages.

"When we start having passengers on a freight rail line, that makes us nervous," John V. Edwards, Norfolk Southern's passenger policy director, said in December at a rail conference in Richmond. He declined to comment on recent negotiations with DOT.

DOT is expected this spring to announce a new route, based on recommendations by several Raleigh residents that would bypass Five Points by lifting the trains on new tracks over Capital Boulevard.

Illinois and Washington also went through tough negotiations with freight railroads before they secured the bulk of their fast-train money, and Virginia is still haggling over terms with CSX. Smaller grants in other states are still up in the air, but North Carolina's was the last big-dollar deal to be resolved.

Conti said the state will apply in coming weeks for more federal funds to advance plans for the track to Richmond, to help pay for a new Amtrak-and-transit depot in downtown Raleigh, and finish the improvements between Raleigh and Charlotte.

Fast track money

Now that new governors in three states have rejected their shares of \$8 billion in stimulus grants, North Carolina has moved up to fourth place among states that will spend federal money for faster passenger train service.

Out of 20 states that have received \$4.9 billion so far, here are the five with the most:

California: \$2.89 billion

Illinois: \$1.14 billion

Washington: \$590 million

North Carolina: \$59 million received so far, \$461 million expected soon under terms of a railroad agreement signed Monday. Separate negotiations are planned for the remaining \$25 million.

Vermont: \$50 million

Rejected by Wisconsin, Ohio and Florida: \$3.6 billion (including \$2.4 billion recently offered for competitive bids from other states)

Sources: N.C. DOT, Federal Railroad Administration