



Maglev project sits still due to lack of funding

By Paul Peirce

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One thing critics and supporters of the controversial, \$3.5 billion maglev transit proposal for Western Pennsylvania can agree on is that 2007 will be a bellwether for its future.

Seemingly stalled for four years while federally mandated environmental impact assessments were completed, the high-speed train project's future could be determined this summer as Congress debates funding for long-range transportation priorities nationwide.

Congress allotted \$90 million in 2005 for engineering and impact studies on three proposals -- \$45 million for one connecting Las Vegas to California, and the rest for the Pittsburgh area project and another one between Baltimore and Washington D.C.

That money is depleted, and Federal Railway Administration spokeswoman DeDe Cordell said millions more will have to be appropriated if any further progress is to be made toward establishing a high-speed maglev system in the U.S. Authorities will determine how much is needed after reviewing the impact assessments still being finalized.

"It's still in the works, but right now the big problem is funding," Cordell said.

Maglevs -- short for magnetic levitation -- are much faster than traditional commuter trains that travel with steel wheels on steel rails. They use super magnets to float above a cushion of air, and propel them at speeds up to 270 mph.

The proposed local rail system would connect Pittsburgh International Airport in Findlay to Pittsburgh, Monroeville and Hempfield, near Greensburg, in Westmoreland County. Planners predict the round trip would take 35 minutes -- including stops.

The disagreement over continued funding for maglev is evident in the opinions of two veteran voices in Washington, D.C.: U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, a Philadelphia Republican, and Rep. John P. Murtha, a Johnstown Democrat.

Specter is among the nation's most ardent champions for maglev and is a member of the powerful Senate Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee.

"Senator Specter remains committed to making maglev a reality and continues working to establish a 54-mile demonstration project in the Pittsburgh region," said Specter's press secretary, Scott Hoeflich.

Hoeflich said Specter anticipates Congress deliberating later this year legislation to make the project eligible for \$45 million more in federal funds.

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However, Murtha considers funding maglev low priority. "The congressman believes the project has not moved forward to date because of other, more important budgetary concerns. Our office hasn't been asked to do anything with it for years," said Murtha's press secretary, Megan Grote.

She added that Murtha believes it stands a "slim chance" for additional funding later this year.

Lack of support doesn't surprise Westmoreland County Commission chairman Tom Balya. "All appearances we've received recently is that it is dead. Primarily it's the financial aspect, that it simply costs too much," said Balya, who has favored maglev.

"But there's also a question of whether anyone can change the peoples' travelling habits. People enjoy their cars."

China developed the first commercially operated maglev in 2003 at a cost of \$1.2 billion. Last fall, the highly touted transit method suffered a setback when human error caused a train in Germany to crash into a maintenance cart on a test track, killing 23 passengers.

Fred Gurney, president of Maglev Pennsylvania, remains optimistic. He said the project is far from dead.

He said the real key will be whether Congress decides to fund construction aspects in late 2008 and 2009. "That's the next six-year funding cycle," Gurney said.

Gurney believes Western Pennsylvanians should be enthusiastic about being considered along with the Las Vegas and Baltimore-Washington projects.

"When you compare it to the cost of building new highways and truly put it in perspective, they are all very expensive and I believe maglev compares very, very favorably. And you can put it in with less of an environmental footprint (requiring less space)," Gurney said.

Bob Grove, spokesman for the Port Authority of Allegheny County, said the agency's planning department is finalizing the impact statement that probably will be submitted to railway administration in March.

In January 2001, the administration chose the Pennsylvania project for an environmental study. A project team consisting of Port Authority and PennDOT and Maglev Inc., a for-profit corporation, that has advanced the maglev effort for more than a decade, assisted in completing the study.

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