

FOUR CORNERS

Public meetings kicking off rail service feasibility study process draw considerable interest

Officials have until October 2024 to produce federally funded feasibility study

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Key Points

The meetings were organized by the Four Corners Freight Rail Study Team, which includes representatives of San Juan County and the Navajo Nation.

Those two entities have signed a memorandum of understanding to work together on the project.

To learn more about the project, visit 4cornersfreightrail.com.

FARMINGTON — More than 100 people showed up earlier this week for a pair of public meetings related to an effort to bring railroad service back to San Juan County.

The meetings were organized by the Four Corners Freight Rail Study Team, which includes representatives of San Juan County and the Navajo Nation, the two entities that have signed a memorandum of understanding to work together on the project. The first gathering took place Sept. 13 at the Phil L. Thomas Performing Arts Center in Shiprock, while the second one was held at the Farmington Civic Center on Sept. 14.

Each meeting drew more than 50 people who were interested in hearing more about how local officials are developing a study to examine the feasibility of the project, a massive, complicated undertaking with a price tag that has been estimated at between \$350 million and \$500 million. The study could lead to the construction of a rail spur of approximately 90 miles that would stretch from San Juan County to the existing Interstate 40 rail corridor that runs from Los Angeles to Chicago.

The Sept. 14 meeting was highlighted by an appearance by Kevin Keller, vice president of the internationally recognized rail design firm HDR based in Omaha, Nebraska, that has been

hired to produce the feasibility study being financed by a \$2 million federal grant. Keller led the crowd through the process by which the study would be produced and discussed the various issues it would address, including who might own the rail spur and where it would be located.

Keller began his presentation by noting that the idea of bringing rail service back to San Juan County is a notion that has been studied for 50 years, although it has never resulted in a move forward. But officials associated with this effort are optimistic this time will be different, he said, because of the memorandum of understanding that was signed two years ago between county and Navajo leaders — a historic agreement that puts the project on new footing.

"It really is a unique partnership," Keller said. "That doesn't happen every day."

Keller said he recently had finished working on an infrastructure project in Utah that involved the state government there and officials of the Ute Nation. He said he believed that was the only other example in the country of tribal officials and state or county officials cooperating on such a sizable project.

One of the first tasks for HDR officials will be to reach out to representatives of the 32 Navajo Nation chapters that could be affected by the project and solicit their feedback, Keller said.

A high percentage of those who attended the meetings were Native Americans.

More than half of those who attended the Sept. 14 meeting were Native Americans. San Juan County Manager Mike Stark said nearly the entire crowd at the Sept. 13 meeting in Shiprock met that description — an illustration of how much interest the project has generated among members of that community.

Not all of those attendees appeared to be all in on the possibility of a railroad spur being built. Some of the chapter officials who were introduced at the latter meeting expressed concerns about how a rail line might create excessive noise or disrupt livestock grazing, while another shared misgivings about the wisdom of Navajo officials partnering with outside entities on such a project.

But in a Sept. 15 interview with The Daily Times, Stark said an audience member in Shiprock offered a much different perspective. Citing the importance of building such projects for the sake of her grandson, the woman said the rail line would help bring new jobs to the county, thus giving young people a reason to stay rather than moving away to find steady

employment.

"Generally speaking, the sentiment at both meetings was very positive," he said, though he acknowledged there were concerns raised about noise.

Keller talked about how the return of rail service to the county would have significant positive effects on the economy, the environment and highway safety. Supporters of the project believe the addition of rail service not only would provide local companies with an additional means by which to ship and receive products, but that it perhaps would attract new firms to the area.

Keller provided statistics illustrating how shipments by rail require far fewer greenhouse gas emissions than shipments by diesel truck. And he said the elimination of a sizable amount of truck traffic from U.S. Highway 550 — which long has ranked as one of the more dangerous routes in New Mexico — would help make that road safer for other motorists.

He said officials from his firm, working with county and tribal officials, will develop cost estimates for the project, including operational and maintenance estimates. They also will develop an environmental analysis and an economic feasibility analysis.

All that work has to be done by October 2024, when the study must be completed to meet the terms of the federal grant, Stark said.

Also addressing the crowd at the Sept. 14 meeting were San Juan County Commissioner Terri Fortner, Arvin Trujillo of Four Corners Economic Development and Farmington City Councilor Janis Jakino.

Fortner said the signing of the MOU already has allowed the project to make more progress than any previous effort of its kind, while Trujillo — who said he was invited to speak at the behest of Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez — emphasized that the MOU between the tribe and the county did not require the Navajo Nation to cede any control over the project.

"It only established that the Navajo Nation would work with key stakeholders on bringing rail service to the county," he said.

He encouraged everyone with an opinion or concern about the project to make their voice heard.

"We're open to all questions, we're open to all inquiries, we're open to all comments," he said.

Jakino noted that the idea of returning rail service to the county is one that local officials have grappled with for ages.

"For as long as I can remember, talk of rail service has been just that — talk," she said.

She hopes this effort will not end the way so many others have.

"There's so much to be had here, so much good," she said.

Stark said as organizers of the study begin to piece together possible routes for the rail line and develop ideas for who might own and operate it, more public meetings would follow to solicit public feedback on those ideas. He said the possibility exists that additional spurs could be constructed off that main line to serve specific industries or businesses that would benefit from having rail service available.

He also said that the recently-averted national rail strike may have shown many people now important rail service is to the nation's economy and what kind of impact its addition might have on the county's future.

Stark said the Farmington area is one of the larger metropolitan areas in the continental United States without rail service, and he said it likely has missed out on numerous economic opportunities because of that. He said the lack of rail service also results in San Juan County consumers paying higher prices for goods because of higher shipping costs.

"That makes it difficult to diversify the economy," he said of the lack of rail service.

He said the addition of a spur would be a tremendous asset to the community, providing existing businesses with lower transportation costs and allowing them access to new markets they can't reach now.

He also pointed to the fortuitous timing of this new effort, explaining that the recent passage of the American Rescue Plan Act, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the Deficit Reduction Act all could provide much-needed federal funding for the construction of a new railroad spur.

"We might have great potential for the federal government being a great funder of this," he said.

To learn more about the project, visit 4cornersfreightrail.com.

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