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Public-Private Partnership Eyed For Regional High Speed Rail.

Governor Jay Inslee in his 2017-19 biennial budget has [proposed \\$1 million](#) to fund a feasibility study on an ultra-high speed rail line between Portland and Vancouver, B.C, which business leaders say could strengthen regional economic development. Proponents argued February 1 at a Senate Transportation Committee meeting that the proposed public-private partnership could cut travel times between Vancouver, B.C. and Seattle down to one hour and reduce traffic congestion on the interstate highways.

However, top ranking panel members say money for the study may be hard to come by this session. One lawmaker suggests a less costly update to a [1992 state study](#) that concluded a high speed rail line was viable. Inslee's proposal is similar to that study in that it would assess many of the same Washington cities as potential rail stations, including Bellingham, Everett, Seattle, SeaTac, Tacoma, Olympia, and Vancouver.

Private Sector Push For High Speed Rail

The governor's proposal comes on the heels of a September Cascadia Conference hosted by Microsoft in Vancouver, B.C., where tech industry leaders emphasized their desire for a bullet train to promote stronger regional ties between Seattle and Vancouver, B.C. Proponents include the Association of Washington Business, Washington Roundtable, and all 11 members of the Microsoft Board of Directors.

"There is time, there is energy, and maybe even dollars that they're (employers) willing to put forward on this," Inslee's Transportation Executive Policy Advisor Charles Knutson said.

In agreement was Microsoft lobbyist Michael Groesch, who told the committee "there's a lot of things that could work together to help both economies grow faster and stronger."

Strengthening Weak Regional Economic Ties

A [2016 study](#) by Boston Consulting Group found ties unusually weak between the two metro areas. It noted that "although only 120 miles separate the two cities...their level of connectedness is more akin to cities that are 2,000 miles apart. Of the handful of companies that operate in both cities, most have a large presence in one and only a satellite footprint in the other."

Based on LinkedIn data, the study also determined that Seattle had stronger connections to Atlanta than Vancouver, B.C.

A bullet train could change that, says Knutson.

"In a word, this is economic development," he said. "We've known really since the days of the Wild West that when the train comes through the town it provides an opportunity for economic activity and for growth."

Study: Bullet Trains Bring Prosperity

Knutson's remarks match the findings of a [2009 study](#) conducted by the London School of Economics and Political Science and the University of Hamburg. It examined the economic impact a German high speed train line between Cologne and Frankfurt on two cities, where service was available, compared to the other 3,000 nearby cities that did not have access. The authors found that those two cities' gross domestic product (GDP) increased by 2.7 percent over a four-year period after the train was built, which was directly attributable to the new metro access provided by that rail service.

Washington's Amtrak Cascades trains currently offer trips between Portland and Vancouver, B.C. However, the trains can only go 79 miles per hour (mph), one third the speed of a 250 mph bullet train. Also, Amtrak offers only two daily trips between Seattle and Vancouver, B.C., four between Seattle and Portland.

"A trip up there (to Vancouver, B.C. from Seattle) in a day is currently almost impossible," Groesch said. "High speed rail is an option for that."

He added that "these two lines, both Amtrak and ultra high speed rail, can coexist and complement one another, because they provide a different type of service."

Knutson: Compelling Case For High Speed Rail

A private [Texas-based company](#) is currently developing a privately-funded, 240-mile ultra high speed rail line from Houston to Dallas. The line will offer rides every 30 minutes, reducing travel times between those cities from roughly four hours in a car to less than 90 minutes.

Knutson said that travel times between Seattle and Vancouver, B.C. could be reduced by rail from two and half hours currently in a car to just one.

That time savings could be crucial for commuters as the Central Puget Sound region grows. That region's population has increased from three million to nearly four million in less than twenty years, and the Puget Sound Regional Council expects another million more residents by 2040. Home purchasers are already seeking more affordable homes in areas farther north and south, driven in part by a lack of available land and restrictive land use regulations.

"We (Washington state) are now bigger than the country of Norway," Knutson said. "We're bigger than Finland. Bigger than Denmark. We're bigger than Ireland. And in a growing state, it's important that we are providing our people with the best means to move as quickly and safely as possible."

However, whether the idea is an easy sell to legislators may depend on the project's final price tag and the amount taxpayers must cover. Committee Assistant Ranking Minority Member Sen. Marko Liias (D-21) told Knutson "the number one question from the Transportation Budget Committee is 'How much does it cost?'"

He also asked whether the private companies interested in the study would be willing to chip in, something Groesch said was possible.

Liias' emphasis on minimizing state costs is shared by Transportation Vice Chair Sen. Tim Sheldon (D-35), a member of the Senate Majority Coalition Caucus. He told Lens appropriating \$1 million for the study could prove "tough this year." A less costly alternative is updating the 1992 high speed rail study, he added.

“It might be good to dust off what we have on the shelf and take a look at it before we start investing that much money in a proposal that we’ve studied several times before,” he said.

However, Groesch stressed to panel members at the February 1 meeting the need to thoroughly examine the concept in order to make the best decision moving forward. “If we don’t ask those questions (through a study), we’ll never get the answers.”

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By TJ Martinell - February 10, 2017

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