In Case You Missed It

On the Line: Will a Dallas-to-Houston Bullet Train Revolutionize Texas?

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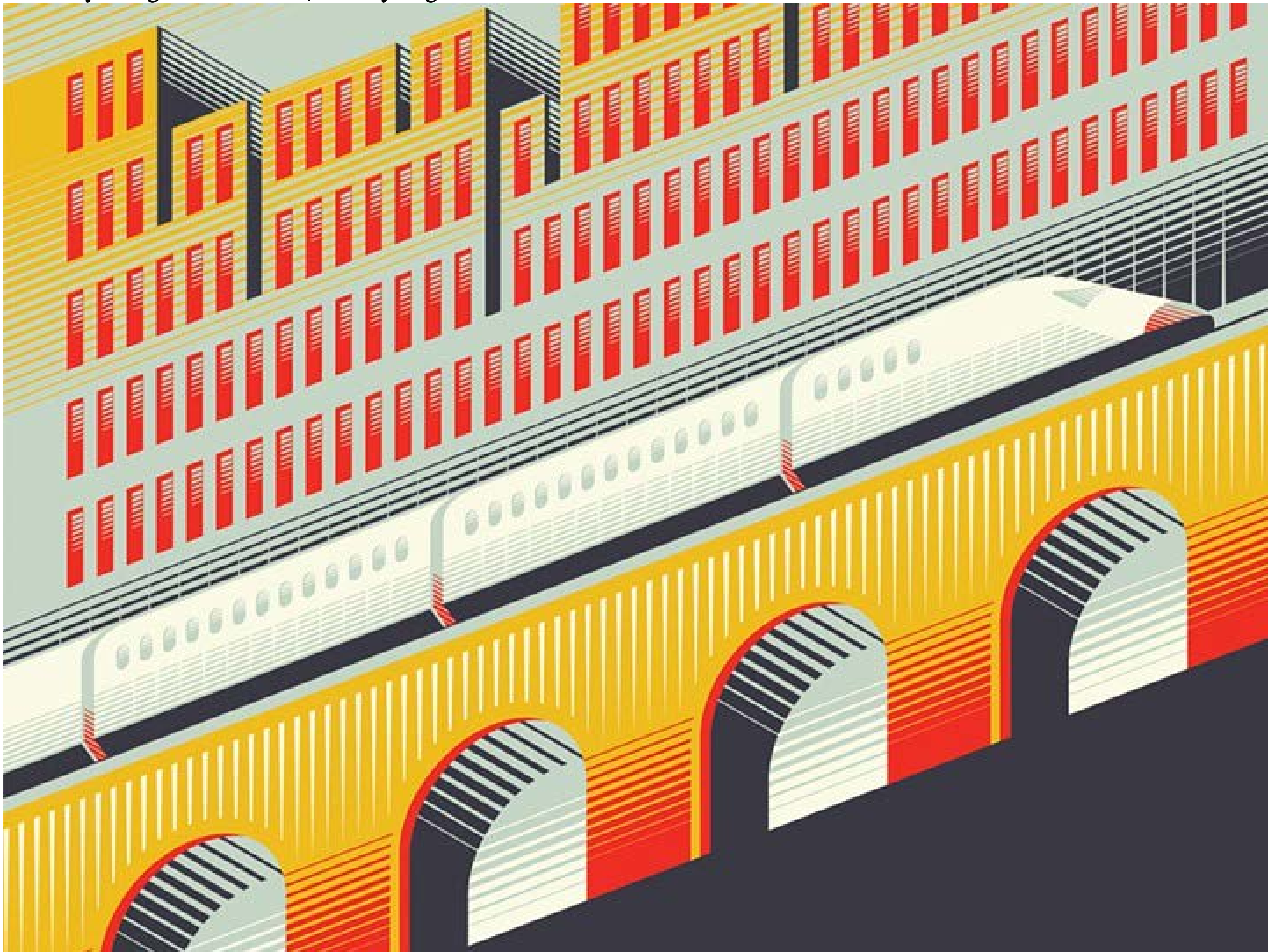

Matt Chase

Clarence E. Sullivan arrived in Ellis County in 1890 to seek his fortune. Though barely 18, he was already well-tempered by life. A runaway buckboard had killed his parents when he was a

child, leaving him to be raised by an older brother who scratched out a meager living outside Canton. The Houston and Texas Central Railroad had come to Ellis County two decades earlier and transformed the area from lightly used pastureland to a powerhouse of cotton production, a place where an enterprising young man with a knack for farming might carve out a foothold.

Clarence — he went by Sam — found work as a farmhand. He'd soon squirreled away enough of his earnings to rent a small tract of land and plant his own crop, about a dozen miles southwest of Ennis. He made enough off his first year's harvest to buy the property and enough in subsequent years to acquire neighboring parcels. By the time he died in 1939 he'd accumulated some 2,000 acres, which were divided equally among his three children, and then further divided among Sullivan's descendants as the years passed, some of whom farmed and some of whom went on to other work.

Grandson John retired from farming in 1985. His son Jim, in his mid-30s at the time, had spent the past decade working in town, supervising tellers at Ennis State Bank, but he'd begun to chafe at the bland monotony of office work. "He had the equipment and all, so I made him a deal and moved in and started farming," Jim Sullivan recalls. Farming, he says, "was always in my blood."

Though Sam Sullivan's original 2,000 acres has been carved up among his various descendants, it has remained basically intact, enough so that the family still refers to it collectively as "the Sullivan land." Jim grows a smattering of crops — corn, wheat, sunflowers, milo, some soy beans — on about 1,000 acres, some of which are in his father's name, some of which he rents from his non-farming relatives. His brother farms another chunk, and a handful of nephews cultivate the rest. Their homes all dot the property.

"It's a good business," Sullivan says. "It's like everything else, you have to be on the ball. This year, because of the rains, it's not been a very good year. [But] we've had several pretty good years, so I guess you have to take some bad ones with the good ones."

The Sullivan land might not remain intact for long. It straddles a corridor of high-voltage power lines that a private company, Texas Central Railway, has identified as the preferred route for its planned Dallas-to-Houston bullet train. The company is still in the planning stages but ultimately intends to acquire a 100-foot-wide strip of land for the rail line, likely through eminent domain.

Sullivan, who is plainspoken but personable, drove the *Observer* out to his property one afternoon in late July. "It's sort of misleading, them talking about it following this power line," he says as his white pickup passes between hulking steel transmission towers straddling a farm-to-market road near his farm. He points to a lonely house a hundred yards or so from the power lines. "The actual place where the rail will come through will be directly through this old boy's house here."

The line will be modeled after the Shinkansen rail network in Japan. The tracks themselves, one set going in either direction, will run primarily on a solid, 14-foot-high berm surrounded by security fencing. Some sections — Texas Central estimates 100 miles — will be elevated, and the rest will be dotted with an undetermined number of underpasses. Still, Sullivan and his

neighbors are skeptical of the railway's promises and expect the final line will be something akin to the Berlin Wall.

Sullivan steers his pickup onto Sullivan Road and crosses onto the Sullivan land. To the left, brown and desiccated cornstalks droop in the sun. "The rail comes right through the middle of this field," Sullivan says. To the right, a John Deere tractor driven by a nephew putters in the field. "We try to get to those tractors in the afternoons because they're air-conditioned," Sullivan explains. His phone chirps and he flips it open with his mouth. It's the nephew, who's curious about the camera he spotted in the passenger window. "That's the *Dallas Observer*. They're wanting to put you in [as] the most eligible bachelor in the back ... We're doing something about that rail ... Yeah ... Mmhmm ... I'll talk to you later." Sullivan flips his phone shut and puts it in his pocket. "He's bored in there," he offers.

Sullivan passes his father's house, then his brother-in-law's, whose driveway and garage will be bisected by the train. His own house, a white clapboard that he and his wife built in 2009, is a couple hundred yards further down but well on the other side of the planned rail line. "I'll have to go to Bardwell [about seven miles away] to drive around to visit him, where otherwise my house is the next one down the road where we can walk."

Whether the rail will actually sever Sullivan from his brother-in-law is unclear. Texas Central officials say they have neither the desire nor the legal authority to close any roads, no matter the rumor circulating that they will dead-end all but four of the 40-plus east-west county roads in Ellis County. But Sullivan's concern highlights the fundamental split in the bullet-train debate. While the proposal has fanned excitement in Dallas and Houston, which covet the rail link as a spur to economic development and an emblem of Texas ingenuity, the places in between — small towns and rural counties along the route that have largely been bypassed by the so-called "Texas miracle" — have greeted the proposal with resentment and suspicion. Rural lawmakers tried in vain to kill the proposal, but property owners like Sullivan remain the main force standing in the bullet train's path.

“These trains are so beautifully constructed that you travel at more than 200 mph and the only way you’d know it is looking out the window.”

Sitting in his full-size model of a locomotive engine, located upstairs in the "train room" of his home in The Woodlands, Bob Leilich, a railroad consultant with more than 40 years experience in planning rail lines, can already picture himself arriving at a new station, walking through the lobby, stepping onto a bullet train and settling into a plush seat while the train moves quietly through Central Texas countryside at 205 mph between 14-foot-high walls to keep obstructions, like cows, off the line, and then glides into downtown Dallas 90 minutes later. "The bullet train is remarkable," Leilich says. "These trains are so beautifully constructed that you travel at more than 200 mph and the only way you'd know it is looking out the window or a slight jitter in your teacup as the train moves."

He argues that the traffic between Dallas and Houston is only supposed to get worse — the Texas Department of Transportation has issued a report saying that the driving time between the

two cities will increase from four hours to six hours by 2035. On top of that, the state population is predicted to double by 2050, according to a report from the Office of the State Demographer. Leilich says going with high-speed rail expansion rather than simply widening the roads makes more sense. "Additional lanes are expensive, they take up more space and they aren't used full capacity all the time. It's a waste of resources. [A] high-speed rail system gets more capacity for the cost and the right-of-way it takes up. It's the sensible thing to do. The Texas Central project will use Japanese N700-I bullet train technology and some Japanese funding. It will cost more than $10 billion, bring in 10,000 construction jobs and connect two of the largest metro areas in the state, according to board member Robert Eckels, the front man of the company.

For the people in between, that's not much of a sales pitch. Kyle Workman, a founding member of Texans Against High-Speed Rail, maintains Texas Central will use eminent domain to take land from people in the rural counties but those people won't get anything out of it. "People think that there's nothing out here, but people out here ranch and farm. They use this land, and the bullet train is going to plow right over them," Workman says.

On the other hand, Eckels insists this is a chance that Texas can't afford to pass up. "This is one of those transformational projects that will bring Texans closer together and provides a transportation that you don't have in other parts of the country," Eckels says. "We have the capacity to do it, and it's privately funded so it won't cost taxpayers anything."

No matter which way you cut it, the high-speed rail line is an enormous undertaking requiring billions of dollars in funding to allow construction workers to reshape and repurpose 3,000 acres of land between Houston and Dallas. Texas Central officials say the high-speed rail line will be a reality in the next six years.

It would be a revolutionary project. The question remains whether the high-speed rail line will unite people across the state or further exacerbate a growing divide in Texas between those who reside in the cities and those who live in the country. Will the Dallas-to-Houston line recast how people travel in Texas or will it create a cavernous breach with the bullet train snaking from city to city while rural outposts sink into further isolation?

EXPAND

Texas Central Railway wants to send Japanese bullet trains like this one rocketing between Dallas and Houston. The people who live between the cities would rather they didn't.
Scfema/Wikimedia Commons

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Over the years, many projects have been proposed that would slam through the rural counties in Central Texas. First came the railroads that connected communities and enabled trade in a way that wasn't possible through the poor roads and unreliable waterways of early Texas.

The advent of the interstate highway system in the 1950s and improved air travel shifted people away from passenger rail. When passenger rail collapsed in the 1960s and 1970s, it was replaced by more highways, according to Kyle Shelton, a transportation historian at the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University.

Then there was the Trans-Texas Corridor, the plan to crisscross Texas with 4,000 miles of privately developed tollways, railways and utility lines. The plan, then-Governor Rick Perry's baby, was fiercely opposed by rural constituents who formed subregional planning commissions to fight it. The Trans-Texas Corridor met its demise in the state Legislature in 2007.

Texas Central officials hoped to dodge the political tangle that comes with a government-funded infrastructure project by keeping the high-speed rail line private. The Dallas-to-Houston high-speed rail line is the brainchild of Texas Central, cooked up by one of the founders, Richard Lawless. As an Asia hand with the CIA and U. S. Department of Defense he was stationed for extended periods in Japan, where he developed a fascination with the Shinkansen bullet train. It wasn't so much the train's 200 mph speeds that impressed him as it was its "credibility as a transit system." It was, quite simply, the best way to get around Japan — impeccably safe, completely reliable and incredibly easy to use. As a result, the system became a transformative force in Japan, both shaping and driving economic growth.

During his career, Lawless had developed a friendship with the chairman of Central Japan Railway, or JR Central. Over dinner one evening in 2008, they mused about the possibility the company's recently introduced fifth-generation bullet train system, the N700-I, might be ready for export. "Have you looked at taking the complete system overseas?" Lawless asked him. "You know, it's time to do that," the JR Central chief replied.

Lawless, who'd just left the Department of Defense, gathered consultants and rail experts and spent the next several months studying the possibility. The most obvious place for high-speed rail in the United States — the heavily populated Boston-New York-Philadelphia corridor — was ruled out immediately because of the density of development and because it was already served by Amtrak. Also off the table was California, where a separate rail project was being planned. They whittled the other 97 corridors down to five that seemed likely to attract funding and turn a profit. In 2009, a year after their dinner, Lawless and JR Central partnered to create a U.S. company, U.S.-Japan High-Speed Rail, to push for the development of high-speed rail along one of the five identified linkages: Los Angeles-Las Vegas; L.A.-Phoenix; Tampa-Orlando-Miami; and both Dallas-Austin-San Antonio and Dallas-Houston.

The Dallas-Houston route presented the best option. The terrain between the cities is flat, with no mountains to tunnel through or major waterways to bridge. It is also sparsely populated, which minimizes right-of-way costs and messy eminent domain battles. The cities are 240 miles apart, in the middle of what rail experts describe as the 200 to 300 mile "sweet spot" — too far to comfortably drive but close enough that time savings from traveling by air are basically nonexistent. The Dallas and Houston areas are large and economically dynamic, with abundant commerce between the two.

Lawless and JR Central weren't the first to look at Dallas and Houston and envision a bullet train. The most serious proposal began in 1989, as Japanese and European train makers searched for a foothold in the untapped U.S. market and the Texas Legislature created the Texas High-Speed Rail Authority. A consortium led by French train manufacturer GEC-Alstrom beat out a German-led group, Texas FasTrac, and was awarded a 50-year franchise in 1991. Texas TGV proposed to link the Texas Triangle, i.e., Dallas, Houston and Austin/San Antonio, estimating ridership at nearly 12 million passengers per year. The deal fell apart three years later when Texas TGV missed a fundraising deadline, which was precipitated by the group's failure to lift a federal cap on the amount of tax-exempt bonds the company could issue.

Nancy Beddingfield, whose Busy-B Ranch sits just outside of Jewett, a town of about 1,100 residents midway between Dallas and Houston, remembers that first attempt to bring high-speed rail to Texas. On a hot day in 1991, she stood on her front porch watching a stranger in a suit maneuver his car up her dirt drive, plumes of red dust flying up behind him. He parked and strode up the rest of the driveway to her house.

Beddingfield, a petite woman who holds herself so ramrod straight that she seems tall, wasn't going to make it any easier for the man. She greeted him and waited.

"I'd like to buy some land from you," the stranger said. His company was building a high-speed rail line between Dallas and Houston, he explained, and they needed a strip of land through her ranch — so large that almost every proposed infrastructure project must pass through it — and they were prepared to offer a fair price.

"This land is not for sale at any price," Beddingfield replied.

"Everyone has a price," he answered.

"Honey, you have just met someone who doesn't," she said.

That was the beginning of a long and drawn out fight to stop the first Texas bullet train project, Beddingfield, now 74, says. She and her husband, Jimmy, worked with rural legislators and lobbyists, haunted the capitol in Austin and held protests. "It was a rough fight," she says now.

But Beddingfield and landowners like her had a powerful ally then in Southwest Airlines. Ben Barnes, a former Texas lieutenant governor who worked with Texas TGV, blames Southwest for scuttling the deal.

Indeed, Dallas' hometown airline attacked the project with delirious fervor. Herb Kelleher, the airline's flamboyant founder and chairman, described Texas TGV's proposal variously as a "gussied up prairie schooner," a "Conestoga wagon with lights" and a "backwards somersault into the 19th century." He predicted that the rail line's inevitable default on $6 billion worth of bonds would "make the savings and loan collapse look like the loss of Park Place when you're playing Monopoly" and warned that it was "the kind of project that could lead to a personal income tax" in Texas.

Southwest, meanwhile, was outmaneuvering bullet-train supporters in both Austin and Washington. "Herb Kelleher won the chess game," Barnes says. The commission was closed and they dropped the idea of high-speed rail.

Initially, Texas Central was looking at a handful of different routes, but in February officials announced they'd selected a line that will go from downtown Dallas, following a high voltage utility corridor through nine rural counties before following U.S. 290 to the 610 Loop. Eckels says they're hoping to run the line into the northwest side of Houston and then to move along the Interstate 10 corridor into downtown Houston. It's still unclear where the line will actually go.

"We get people that yell at us and people that like us," Eckels says. "It's still unsettled, and I fully understand why people are unnerved by that. There's a lot of uncertainty about the exact route. We are very sympathetic to that and we are willing to compensate any landowners and to work with rural landowners to make sure they don't lose access to their land."

One of the areas fighting the change is Grimes County, which for decades has had some pretty rotten luck. It's a tired, impoverished, agricultural county with modest natural resources that has never attracted much industry. "People here are land rich and dirt poor — we're one of the poorest counties in the state — and now the bullet train is coming through," Grimes County Judge Ben Leman says. Leman sits in his cavernous office in the county courthouse, the only building in the county seat of Anderson that doesn't look like it should be on the set of a movie about the Great Depression.

While the railroads all used to pass through Grimes, the rise of the car left the county behind, Leman says. Grimes County has been waiting more than 30 years for its big chance, but Leman says all of their hopes have been pinned on the completion of Texas 249. The 249 expansion started decades ago but stalled out in the Houston suburbs. In February, the Texas Department of Transportation announced plans to finally take 249 out to Grimes County, which would connect it more directly with Houston and the chance to attract employers. Leman found out that the proposed high-speed rail line would run right across their newly expanded highway. "It will be a walled-in train and it won't stop in Grimes or do us any good and then it will lock everything in place on our portion of 249. Bridges over these rail lines are expensive and so are tunnels under it. We can't count on those being built," Leman says.

Railroad consultant and bullet train supporter Bob Leilich says some may be hurt by Texas Central's plans, but the project is a net win for Texas.
Daniel Kramer

Leman started organizing rural opposition. The county commissioners in every county on the proposed line have passed measures against the bullet train. Rural counties don't have the political power they once had compared with the cities, so the only chance they have of being heard is by uniting, Leman says. Leman met Kyle Workman at a Texas Central meeting in Jewett and got him to join the group he was setting up, Texans Against High-Speed Rail. They've become the most vocal detractors of the proposal.

Workman lives on about 100 acres of land just outside of Jewett and he travels to the cities most of the week for his job as a construction consultant. He and his family moved to Jewett from Austin four years ago because he and wife Christen wanted to raise their children in the country. When Workman found out about the bullet train line — one of the proposed routes would take the train along the edge of his back pasture — he went to the Jewett mayor and proposed setting up a new subregional planning commission to oppose the high-speed rail line, just like the subregional committees that had previously been established to fight the Trans-Texas Corridor.

"I moved out here to get away from the trains and the silliness of the city, and then the train came to me. That was when I knew this was a problem I was going to have to solve."

Eckels insists Texas Central will do everything to make sure people's land is disturbed as little as possible, but many people say they can't risk trusting those reassurances when so much about the project has yet to be determined. Besides, many are convinced high-speed rail will never work in Texas. "Seeing the train run will dispel a lot of these fears that people have today. It's fear of the unknown, and until you have a chance to see the train in real life it will be a challenge to dispel those fears," Eckels says.

In 2009, President Obama pledged $8 billion in funding to encourage high-speed rail in the United States. Immediately, three projects — in Florida, Wisconsin and California — obtained funding. However, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker and Florida Governor Rick Scott canceled the projects and sent the federal government's money back. (There's currently a privately funded Florida rail project slated to open in 2017, but the train, with top speeds of 125 mph, doesn't qualify as high-speed rail.) Only the California project is left, a 220-mph line running from San Francisco to Los Angeles. The project will cost billions, has been met with fierce opposition in California and isn't scheduled to fully open until 2028.

At the same time, the Texas Central project was quietly beginning to gather information on building the Dallas-to-Houston line. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has spent a significant amount of time trying to persuade foreigners to buy the Shinkansen, even offering Japanese bank loans to help countries afford it, without much success. Japanese bullet train technology allows them to produce a train with an impeccable safety record that is always on time, but the company that makes the bullet trains wants to sell each bullet train as a complete closed system set including the rails, trains and software needed to run the trains. The package deal makes the Shinkansen more expensive, but Eckels maintains the extra cost is worthwhile to ensure safety and reliability.

When Eckels was a Harris County judge, he led the creation of the Texas High-Speed Rail and Transportation Corp., a consortium of county and city officials who began pushing construction of the "Texas T-Bone," a high-speed rail line from Dallas-Fort Worth to Austin and San Antonio, with a Houston-bound branch line splitting off in Temple. In 2010, as the Lawless-JR Central team was narrowing its focus to Dallas, they partnered with Eckels and formed Texas Central Railway. Eckels became its chairman and public face.

Things moved rapidly from there, and the company has an ambitious schedule: construction started by 2017, with passenger service launched by 2021. Texas Central officials estimate they'll have 12,000 passengers a day paying fares that will be competitive with airfare. The Dallas-to-Houston rail will have to be frequently serviced to keep the line clear, but it won't have the long lines and invasive process of TSA airport security, Eckels says. Right now, people riding trains on Amtrak arrive at a railroad station and board the train, a simple process, and it's expected high-speed rail would be run the same way.

Financing will be complex. Tim Keith, a North Texas native with a quarter century's experience in finance, was named Texas Central's CEO in July. Keith says about a third of the project,

around $4 billion, will be funded by institutional investors — pension funds, insurance companies and the like looking for projects likely to yield reliable dividends for years. "There's a very large appetite by institutional investors for U.S. infrastructure investment," Keith says.

The rest of the money will come from loans. Keith expects the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation to front several billion dollars. In a subtle shift away from Texas Central's long-standing pledge that the project won't be backed by public funds, Keith said the company plans on pursuing loans through a couple of federal programs, the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA) and the Railroad Rehabilitation & Improvement Financing (RRIF). Texas Central officials may also look into getting approved to sell private-activity bonds, tax-exempt debt often used for public-private infrastructure projects. (Eckels says the company never pledged not to pursue loans and bonds that are available to any company.)

Various high-speed rail experts have speculated that Texas Central will rely on real estate development around its stations for revenue. Art Guzzetti, vice president for policy at the American Public Transport Association, says that JR Central gets more than a third of its revenue from station-related development, including the world's largest Marriott in Nagoya.

Baruch Feigenbaum, a Reason Foundation analyst who supports Texas Central despite his skepticism of most U.S. high-speed rail projects, expects the company to charge between $50 and $60 per ticket, but Feigenbaum's calculations are based on the company owning and developing the land around the stations. Otherwise the fares will have to be significantly higher. Such speculation intensified when Jack Matthews, a powerhouse Dallas developer, was appointed to Texas Central's board. Matthews has holdings in the Cedars neighborhood south of downtown Dallas, where Texas Central plans to build its Dallas station.

But Texas Central officials insist that their business model relies almost entirely on fares, with modest additional revenue from things like parking and concessions. The company expects to eventually pull in some profit from station-related development, but that's not what they're focused on when selling the concept to potential investors.

Meanwhile, state legislators were prepared to try to cut the legs out from under the project during the last legislative session. By the time the 84th Texas Legislature opened in January, anti-bullet train people had already contacted a number of rural legislators about opposing the train. During the session, state Senator Lois Kolkhorst showed up ready to fight, much like she did with the Trans Texas Corridor. The Brenham legislator filed a bill that would prevent any high-speed rail project from using eminent domain to procure land for the rail. It was one of about a half dozen bills aimed at derailing the high-speed rail project. None of the bills made it through the Legislature.

The bullet train supporters weren't as zealous; legislators in favor of high-speed rail worked quietly. Dallas officials supported their efforts, but Houston officials stayed out of the legislative fight. Some Houston officials even sent letters opposing the bullet train to the Federal Railroad Administration.

The cities will need to connect the high-speed rail line with mass transit to really make it workable. Eckels says the highway system already provides enough transportation to get people from bullet train stations to their destinations, but Maureen Crocker, executive director of the Gulf Coast Rail District, says it's always a question of getting passengers to "the final mile." Once the high-speed rail line is built, Houston and Dallas officials will have to make sure people can easily get around the cities. If the city and county officials expand city transportation and light rail and add commuter trains, people will be able to get around easily using a new patchwork system of public and private transportation.

Bullet train opponents keep hearing how cities might respond to the high-speed rail with their own public transit projects, which would fit into a larger framework of public transportation that would make carless travel across Texas possible.

Ellis county farmer Jim Sullivan and his family may be literally split apart by the bullet train's path.
Eric Nicholson

Though similar in broad strokes to the early '90s push for high-speed rail, Texas Central's approach is markedly different. The previous effort was steered by a state agency, the Texas High-Speed Rail Authority, which gave opponents like Southwest abundant opportunity to work political connections to gum up proceedings.

Texas Central has pointedly refused all but the barest possible government involvement, its recent embrace of federal infrastructure loans notwithstanding. It is coordinating with TxDOT and the Federal Railroad Administration, as any rail project must, but the company has refused other help, including a $15 million federal grant earmarked for studying high-speed rail between Dallas and Houston, and remained firmly in the driver's seat, setting its own agenda and timeline.

This has insulated Texas Central both from critics who denounce any public subsidy of high-speed rail and from pressure from public officials who might otherwise stretch the line in politically expedient but financially dubious directions. When several powerful North Texas officials publicly called for an extension of the line from its planned terminus in Dallas to Fort Worth, Texas Central dismissed the notion as unprofitable and forged ahead, leaving TxDOT to initiate and fund a study of a Dallas-Fort Worth link.

The company has also been coy about its foreign backing and has taken pains to promote the line as a homegrown project. The company's website, amid a backdrop of shimmering Texas prairie, proclaims the Dallas-to-Houston project as "America's Bullet Train," which mirrors officials' public statements. In a July announcement that it had met an initial fundraising goal of $75 million, "all from Texas-based investors," Texas Central laid its Texas connections on thick. Not counting references to the company name, the announcement mentioned "Texas" or "Texan" 42 times.

Southwest killed the last bid to create a bullet train line, but this time around, Southwest has been quiet. "Really where we are now, we are on the sidelines," said Southwest spokesman Chris Mainz. "We just haven't seen enough to really know all the details that would lead us to have a position either way."

Southwest's silence is likely related to a fundamental shift in the source of the airline's revenues, says Michael Derchin, an airline industry analyst with CRT Capital Group. In 1991, Southwest was still heavily dependent on its original Texas Triangle routes. Since then, geographic expansion, and the expiration of Wright Amendment restrictions on flights out of Dallas' Love Field, among other factors, have made Southwest a bona fide national carrier. A bullet train "could certainly be a threat, but it wouldn't be a huge big deal like it would have been 25 years ago when that was their bread and butter," Derchin says.

Once it's built and running, between 700 to 1,500 permanent workers will be needed to run, service and maintain the train, Eckels says. Texas Central will also spend a lot of money on advertising and getting people interested in the train. He noted that, traditionally, other rail lines and stations tend to spring up alongside an established high-speed rail line, which could bring more stations and commuter rail to the towns in between Dallas and Houston.

“The actual place where the rail will come through will be directly through this old boy’s house here.”

Texas squandered its first chance to secure the land for a high-speed rail line when the state passed on buying right-of-way from the passenger rail lines in the 1960s, says Leilich, the consultant. Now, it's going to be more difficult, but Leilich is confident that Texas Central will

get it done and that people will be zipping back and forth over the verdant Central Texas countryside in only a few years. "Hindsight is better than foresight by a damned sight, but now we have another shot," he says.

Still, he admits that constructing this line in a way that benefits everyone is impossible. "There's no doubt that if you build this it's going to hurt somebody. Somebody is going to lose something and get nothing out of it, but the number of people that would be adversely affected is so much smaller than the people who will benefit from high-speed rail."

On December 1, Jim Sullivan and a couple hundred of his fellow Ellis County residents filed into the Waxahachie Civic Center to hear Texas Central make its pitch. There was no getting around the fact that Ellis County was merely a pass-through for the line, with no station and no direct benefit to the residents, but a company official did his best to dispel concerns. The rail's right-of-way would be relatively small. The company promised to be generous in its dealings with landowners, resorting to eminent domain only when absolutely necessary. The line would be built on a 14-foot berm, but underpasses would be plentiful. Noise pollution would be minimal. The project would take no tax money; in fact, the right-of-way would be subject to property taxes, which would flow into city and county coffers.

Sullivan didn't believe a word of it. Two decades earlier he'd watched the federal government fritter away $2 billion on the Superconducting Super Collider, a massive underground particle accelerator running beneath Ellis County that was destined to lead to breakthroughs in physics, only to abandon the project a quarter built. A decade later, Governor Rick Perry proposed the Trans-Texas Corridor, which was fatally overwhelmed by opposition before it could take out a broad swath of Ellis County farmland. Sullivan knew a boondoggle when he saw one. "Every taxpayer in Texas is gonna have to pay for something that makes a few people rich and then gets dumped on us," Sullivan says of the Texas Central project.

The concern in Ellis County and elsewhere along the route isn't just that Texas Central's high-speed rail project will be an albatross. There's also a deeper feeling that the rural areas and small towns that once formed Texas' backbone are increasingly being shunted for the convenience of urban elites. To Carma Sullivan, Jim's wife, Texas Central's vision is uncomfortable, almost dystopian. "It reminds me of — have you ever watched *The Hunger Games*?" Carma Sullivan says. "There's the big city, the rest is outlying. It's separated into sectors. How's it divided? By train. That's what it reminds me of. I think of [Ellis County] becoming this outlying district from these big, massive cities." Jim and Carma have planted an anti-Texas Central yard sign in front of their house, even if few people besides relatives and the mailman will travel down Sullivan Road to see it.

Further down the line outside Jewett, Nancy Beddingfield is once again in the crosshairs of high-speed rail, but this time she's trying to resign herself to it. She doesn't have the heart for another fight. "They have the money and the power for this and if they want to build it they will. If that line gets built I don't see how it will miss cutting through here. My daddy would have fought them, but I can't do it again," she says quietly. She sighs and shrugs her shoulders. "But I try not to go borrowing trouble. A lot can happen. Maybe it won't get built."