

WASHINGTON -- President Barack Obama's push for new high-speed rail systems has sparked discussions about bringing such service to Omaha, but not everyone is ready to climb aboard.

Federal agencies plan to begin awarding \$8 billion this summer in economic stimulus funding to support high-speed rail projects. Many states already are lining up to grab that money.

It appears that the funding will be focused on ready-to-go projects and federally recognized high-speed corridors that don't include Nebraska or Iowa. Still, the Obama administration has invited long-range proposals from any interested communities.

That created a little buzz among staff members at the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce.

"As soon as we saw that come out, we started talking about it, . . . saying, 'Hey, why doesn't this come to Omaha?' " said Tim Stuart, the chamber's manager of transportation development.

For years, the political debate over railroads has focused on whether to cut public support for existing passenger train service. The idea of spending money to improve it is a new direction, Stuart said.

"Times change," he said.

Obama's proposal is intended to change the way America travels. He wants to take drivers off the road, reducing U.S. dependence on foreign oil and reducing carbon dioxide emissions.

Having such rail service connected to Omaha could be a boon to area businesses, Stuart said. Chamber representatives plan to look into the idea by talking to federal officials and the state's congressional delegation.

Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., was skeptical, however.

The Omaha congressman said he's glad Obama is pushing for high-speed rail projects -- they probably make sense, he said, in a couple of the country's densely populated areas. But Terry said the notion of high-speed rail lines cutting through wide swaths of the Southeast or Mid west just isn't realistic, given the high level of public subsidies they would require.

"It's a cool concept with a lot of romance involved with it, but I think when it gets down to really designing a plan . . . most of that plan's going to be eliminated or never happen," Terry said.

Omaha, in particular, is unlikely to be targeted for high-speed rail funding, Terry said. He pointed to a study released at the end of 2003 on the viability of a Lincoln-Omaha commuter rail line. It found that the cost per passenger would be too high to make the project eligible for federal support.

The federal government first began identifying high-speed rail corridors in 1991. It has been extending them or establishing new ones ever since. Jake Thompson, a spokesman for Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., said the senator has not pushed for Omaha to be considered for high-speed rail.

"There has not been any strong interest expressed by state, civic or business leaders in Nebraska for this in recent memory," Thompson said.

Thompson suggested that Omaha does not have the population density or traffic congestion to justify the kinds of high-speed rail projects that the stimulus funding is intended to support.

Governors from eight Midwestern states, including Iowa, and the mayor of Chicago already have written a letter lobbying for stimulus money to start building high-speed rail lines connecting Chicago to other parts of the region.

The group is proposing several phases to the project. Later stages of its plan call for some

form of passenger rail project running from Chicago, through Des Moines and other Iowa cities, and ending in Omaha. Proposals for conventional passenger service along that route have been discussed previously.

Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman was not among those who sent the letter.

Mary Jo Oie, a spokeswoman for the Nebraska Department of Roads, said the state has no plans to pursue funding for high-speed rail projects.

"Our priorities are on our transportation and bridges infrastructure," Oie said.

Dave Purdy is president of ProRail Nebraska, a group that advocates improved passenger rail transportation for the state.

Purdy said high-speed rail lines come with high costs, and the relatively small amount of federal money available means Omaha probably won't find itself on the fast track any time soon.

"It looks bloody difficult to me," he said. "I hate to be a pessimist. Normal advocates would be optimists, but it does look difficult to me."

