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Kansas Town File For Federal Grant To Save Southwest Chief

Several Kansas towns are among a coalition working to save passenger train service to nine communities that sit along Amtrak's Southwestern Chief route.

The route runs between Chicago and Los Angeles and currently goes through western Kansas.

"The importance for us in western Kansas is that we have airport service that goes to Dallas but that's it. We don't have transportation going east or west," Rep. John Doll, R-Garden City said.

This week, a coalition of Colorado and Kansas communities, including Hutchinson, Dodge City and Garden City, filed an application under Garden City's name for a competitive TIGER grant through the U.S. Department of Transportation. A similar application last year was denied.

This time around they are seeking $15 million in federal funds. That money would go toward the $24 million in track upgrades Amtrak says are necessary moving forward to support modern passenger train speeds.

The coalition towns, along with the Kansas Department of Transportation (KDOT), Amtrak, and the track's owner, BNSF, have already pledged almost $10 million.

The state of New Mexico has a study currently underway to determine what support it will provide.

"It's going to take a coalition of five entities. We all have to be working together," Rep. Doll said. "If one of the partners falls out, the whole thing goes under."

The communities say they've been working hard to make sure that doesn't happen. They say losing the service would be the loss of a tradition and would also have an economic impact.

"Smaller towns are losing their transportation and that makes the demise of those small towns happen faster," said Ivan Schroeder, who lives in Newton and has taken the Amtrak train many times.

The coalition of cities was formed about three years ago.

That's when Amtrak said it couldn't afford to make the upgrades to the track that are needed given the faster speeds of modern passenger trains. Without the money, the track's owner, Burlington Northern Santa Fe, said in 2016 it would stop maintaining the track for passenger service.

Amtrak proposed moving the Southwestern Chief route to a more southern route that would not go through western Kansas anymore.

Leaders say while an agreement between Amtrak and BNSF runs out in December 2015, some kind of funding arrangement needs to be in place by the end of this year for the track to survive.

"We're closing in on the deadline. It's time the rubber meets the road," Doll said.

But he and others say they are optimistic about the future.

"It's now a waiting game to see if the grant is funded," Doll said.

AP/KAKE