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Cal U maglev connector plan may be gaining more momentum

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An experimental low-speed magnetic levitation train project that would connect California University of Pennsylvania's upper and lower campuses could soon be moving forward again.

With the changing political landscape in Washington, D.C., and one of the project's biggest political supporters, Democratic U.S. Rep. John Murtha, winning re-election, supporters of the maglev project believe more funding is coming.

"This is a great political time for us because the Democrats are very transit-oriented," said David O'Loughlin, president of the North Side-based United States Maglev Development Corp. "Now that the Democrats have taken control of the House, that gives Congressman Murtha a lot of capability to try to take this home."

Brad Clemenson, a spokesman for Murtha, who serves on the House Appropriations Committee, said the Johnstown representative will continue to actively seek funding for the project, but cited the large amount of funding going to the war in Iraq as a concern.

"Certainly he is going to keep on it and provide as much funding as he can," Clemenson said.

The \$188 million project involves a new type of maglev technology, called urban maglev. Rather than being designed to go across long distances, like Pittsburgh's other high-profile proposed maglev project, Urban Maglev is designed to run through cities, can travel up 10-degree inclines and runs at slower speeds. It tops out around 125 miles per hour, while high-speed maglev trains can travel at speeds in excess of 240 miles per hour.

Other Maglev plan on track

The local high-speed maglev project remains in the running for a federal demonstration project. It is competing with Baltimore to get \$45 million in federal funding, and a decision is expected next year.

The low-speed train can be built for a third of the cost of a light rail system and be operated for a quarter of the cost,

according to O'Loughlin.

"This type of maglev could replace subway systems throughout the country," said California University president Angelo Armenti Jr.

However, it has taken about 15 years to get off the ground in California, Pa. Local manufacturers, who are part of a 35-member consortium to develop the system, have been working on building guide rails, cars, doors and other parts for much of this decade without knowing whether the project would ever get the federal funding it needs.

The Federal Transit Agency has already appropriated \$8.5 million in preliminary funding for the project, and work has begun to put the system together. Ellwood City-based manufacturer Hall Industries Inc., for example, sent the first half of a complete maglev car to a test track in San Diego about six months ago. Karoly Kehrler, director of engineering and product development at Hall Industries, said Hall is currently developing the second half of the train car, which will be sent to San Diego for testing in March. The cars cost about \$800,000 to build and created about 30 jobs for Hall Industries.

However, to complete the first phase, which will run from the university's athletic area to student housing and a park-and-ride lot on the upper campus, project leaders still need \$38 million in funding, which will come from a mix of federal and state sources. Later phases will extend the track down to the lower campus and up to a community center located near the upper campus. The first phase will be 2,200 feet long. The entire project will cover 4.5 miles.

The project itself could provide a boost for local manufacturers that are part of the consortium, including Strip District-based Sargent Electric Co., Bedford County-based New Enterprise Stone & Lime Inc., Wilmerding-based Wabtec Corp., Hazelwood-based Union Switch & Signal, Ellwood City-based Hall Industries, Findlay Township-based Mackin Engineering and West Mifflin-based P.J. Dick Inc.

San Diego-based General Atomics is spearheading the project and came up with the technology. It also has a test track located at its headquarters.

"Because (the consortium) companies entered into an agreement with the FTA, we believe these companies are in a great position to create a cottage industry," Armenti said. "I believe people will come here from all over the world to see this."

JOB CREATION

O'Loughlin said the project has already created 100 manufacturing jobs in Western Pennsylvania.

He estimates that, once construction begins on the first phase of the project, about 1,800 jobs would be created.

General Atomics plans to open a technology park in California, Pa., and, if other major metro areas decide to build the Urban Maglev after seeing the California University system, the manufacturers currently working on the project will be in a good position for future contracts.

Jake Haulk, president of the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy, a Castle Shannon-based think tank, said while he doesn't expect the high-speed maglev project to ever get off the ground, due to its expense, he thinks the urban maglev project is worth exploring.

"(Urban maglev) certainly has more uses for mass transit purposes," Haulk said.

"The high-speed is useless for mass transit, but if something can start and stop and go through neighborhoods at less cost, then I think it ought to be explored."

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