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Maglev transit project pushed, could create jobs

By Matthew Santoni

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Supporters of a proposed maglev train from Pittsburgh International Airport to Greensburg wooed state representatives Friday with promises the project could create thousands of jobs in high-tech manufacturing, if the government could pay the \$5.3 billion price tag.

Building the 54-mile magnetic guideway between the airport, Downtown, Monroeville and Greensburg would create demand for an estimated 533,000 tons of steel and 712,000 cubic yards of concrete, and the precision-welding technology that would be used to turn the steel into the track could then be exported around the world, proponents told members of the state House Transportation Committee during a hearing at Carnegie Mellon University.

The first magnetic levitation trains for Pittsburgh would be manufactured in Germany by Transrapid International, which built the only maglev trains in commercial operation, in China. Using magnets that attract and repel each other, the trains hover a few centimeters above the track and can travel at speeds up to 300 mph. But the company would seek to "Americanize" train production if the technology catches on in the United States, moving executives and engineers back and forth across the Atlantic to establish manufacturing facilities here, said Walter Buss, president of Transrapid International-USA.

"If we could grab this opportunity and run with it, we could become the hub for the (maglev) industry — not just for this country, but for this hemisphere," said Bill George, president of the Pennsylvania AFL-CIO.

Fred Gurney, president of McKeesport-based Maglev Inc., said the curves and twists to each piece of the steel guideway required his company to cut costs by developing manufacturing techniques that could be applied to other projects such as bridges, highways and ships.

In written testimony submitted in opposition to the project, Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute based in Washington, questioned whether the project would serve destinations people actually want to go to.

"Americans simply have too many potential destinations for rail transit to be useful. Our homes, jobs and other activity centers are finely spread throughout metropolitan areas," O'Toole wrote.

The project's hefty startup cost and the slow trickle of money have drawn out the planning process during nearly 10 years. The environmental impact

statement was started in 2001 and only recently landed on the desk of Federal Railroad Administrator Joe Szabo, where it awaits his signature, Gurney said. Final approval that would enable bidding on the project would take at least another six months, and though a \$28 million federal grant for additional preliminary engineering was announced in September, none of it has been released.

"We're trying to build high-speed rail, and we've got slow-moving paper. That's the biggest challenge we have," said Donald Dunlevy, state legislative director for the United Transportation Union.

The \$28 million federal grant, which comes from a \$90 million account for maglev projects in the 2005 transportation funding bill, requires a 20 percent state match, said Rep. Joe Markosek, D-Monroeville, the majority chairman of the House Transportation Committee. Finding that state money would be another hurdle for the project, he said.

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