The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) Project 0-4007, The Role of Rural Rail Transportation Districts (RRTDs) in Texas, was originally a one-year project to evaluate and document the history and status of rural rail transportation districts that had been formed in the state of Texas since the state legislature first authorized them in 1981. RRTDs are considered subdivisions of Texas state government with: the power to purchase, operate, and/or build new railroad and intermodal facilities; the right of eminent domain; and the ability to issue revenue bonds. RRTDs are formed by action of one or more county commissioner’s courts under rules outlined in Vernon’s Texas Civil Statutes Title 112, Chapter 13, Article 6650c. Figure 1 (next page) shows a map of the RRTDs as of August 2002.

Between 1981 and 1997, RRTD statutes required that two or more counties cooperate to form a district. RRTDs were generally created to prevent loss of rail infrastructure through rail line abandonment or to preserve abandoned rail right-of-way for redevelopment and possible reinstitution of rail service at some point. In 1997, several amendments to the authorizing legislation for RRTDs were passed by the 75th Legislature, including a provision allowing single counties to form a RRTD. Since that time, there has been renewed interest and an increase in the number of RRTDs being formed. Instead of preserving or improving service on pre-existing rail lines, most single-county districts have been formed with considerably different goals—either to enhance local economic development projects or to construct new rail transportation facilities.

Early in the first year of the project, researchers recognized a need to explore more fully the role that RRTDs could play in the future of rail transportation planning in Texas rather than merely taking a look back at the history of the current districts. As a result, TxDOT approved a second year of project work to look at three emerging issues for RRTDs.

RRTDs can preserve unused rail, improve service, or achieve other rail-use community goals.
During the first year of this project, the research team completed case study reports on each of the existing RRTDs in the state. Each case study included information on when the RRTD was formed, the motivation behind its formation, the activities that it has undertaken, and its current status. Evaluation of the case studies led to the development of a list of best practices for RRTDs using actions taken by successful RRTDs as a model. Also, two major products were completed—a guidebook for considering formation of a RRTD or desiring to evaluate an existing one and a Geographic Information System (GIS) database showing the location of the RRTDs in the state in relation to the rail and highway networks of Texas. The guidebook was designed to serve as a primer on RRTDs and rail transportation that could be used by TxDOT personnel, county commissioners, newly appointed RRTD board members, and others interested in learning more about the powers and duties of a RRTD and its board.

Year two of the project explored three emerging issues for RRTDs in the state. The first of these issues was the establishment of a more formal framework or method through which TxDOT may work closely with RRTDs. The second was development of a list of preliminary criteria for TxDOT to use in evaluating and identifying which rail lines the state would be interested in preserving should funding for purchasing abandoned lines be made available. The preliminary criteria are to be used by TxDOT during the public hearing process to develop rules for administering the fund and/or to evaluate preservation of specific abandoned rail corridors for the state. The third need that the research team investigated concerned the impacts that increasing numbers of single-county RRTDs, created for purposes other than rail line preservation, could potentially have on rail transportation planning in the state.

**What We Found …**

**Year One**

Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) found that several factors have prevented RRTDs from fully meeting the role envisioned for them by the state legislature when they were first authorized. There was very little uniformity or consistency in the activities that it has undertaken, and its current status. Evaluation of the case studies led to the development of a list of best practices for RRTDs using actions taken by successful RRTDs as a model. Also, two major products were completed—a guidebook for considering formation of a RRTD or desiring to evaluate an existing one and a Geographic Information System (GIS) database showing the location of the RRTDs in the state in relation to the rail and highway networks of Texas. The guidebook was designed to serve as a primer on RRTDs and rail transportation that could be used by TxDOT personnel, county commissioners, newly appointed RRTD board members, and others interested in learning more about the powers and duties of a RRTD and its board.

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the linear right-of-way intact and its
track and bridge structures in place
for potential redevelopment of rail
transportation in the future.

Another recent trend identified by
the research has been the formation of
RRTDs in counties with urban centers
rather than along rural rail lines that
carry mainly agricultural products
or are threatened by abandonment.
Several RRTDs have recently been
formed in areas served by ports,
petrochemical plants, and other
industrial facilities that also need
improved access to rail transportation.
In many of these cases, the powers
granted to RRTDs by the legislature
give them the potential capability of
addressing existing transportation
needs by developing new rail routes
(after federal Surface Transportation
Board [STB] approval) or providing
access to an alternate railroad carrier,
thereby introducing competition in
shipping rates.

Year Two

Year two efforts focused on
three emerging issues pertaining to
the future role of RRTDs in Texas.
The first concerned development of
a framework through which RRTDs
and TxDOT could work more
effectively to coordinate plans for
rail infrastructure in the state. TTI
produced several recommendations
for implementation by TxDOT, the
RRTDs, and the state legislature that
will form a straightforward structure
for cooperation between the two units
of state government.

The second issue, development
of preliminary evaluation criteria
for TxDOT to consider in deciding
whether to become involved in
preserving a rail line threatened by
abandonment, resulted in a list of
14 analysis factors. These factors
covered three areas—system/safety-
related factors, business factors,
and funding/local support factors.
The broad coverage of the criteria
included in the list provides a flexible
instrument through which TxDOT
staff and the Texas Transportation
Commission can decide whether the
level of involvement in preserving
the line should be direct (i.e., TxDOT
purchase) or through cooperation
with a local RRTD, or if the line
abandonment should not be opposed
by the state.

The third emerging issue
explored was the efficacy of RRTDs
in building new rail facilities or
lines to alternative rail carriers for
economic development reasons, rather
than focusing on preservation of rail
infrastructure. The powers granted
to RRTDs for construction of new
rail facilities are both promising and
troubling. While the capability for
a government entity to participate in
providing increased rail transportation
options is encouraging as a new tool
to address the state’s transportation
needs, the competitive, commercial,
and private nature of the rail industry
limits the manner in which RRTDs
and other government entities can
become involved. For example,
RRTD attempts to offer additional
rail service by constructing a rail
line for use by an alternate carrier
can potentially attract new business
and encourage development of new
distribution facilities—creating new
jobs and property tax revenues for
a local area. Alternatively, if the
business base does not develop as
expected or a development project
fails for a reason unrelated to the rail
component, construction of such a
rail line could actually reduce the
profitability of one or both lines,
leading to an overall reduction in rail
service to the area or abandonment in
the long term.

For this reason, RRTD boards
should be very selective in supporting
projects that will favor a single
business interest or one rail carrier
over another. The importance of
maintaining rail service where it is
needed, however, calls for increased
public sector awareness and
involvement that RRTDs can provide.
Coordination of activities and
cooperation with state and local rail
planners at TxDOT as recommended
in the year two report (Report 4007-2)
could assist RRTD boards in this area.

The Researchers
Recommend…

• TxDOT, RRTDs, and the state
legislature should take steps to
build a framework for cooperative
planning for rail line preservation
in the state.
• RRTD legislation needs to be
modified/clarified. Specific
recommendations are included in
the year two report
(Report 4007-2).
• Each TxDOT district should
appoint a RRTD liaison. The
proposed duties of this position
are included in the year two report
(Report 4007-2).
• RRTDs should increase sharing of
information on board activities and
status with TxDOT.
The project is documented in the following reports: Report 4007-1, Texas Rural Rail Transportation Districts: Characteristics and Case Studies, and Report 4007-2, Texas Rural Rail Transportation Districts: New Roles and Relationships.

Supplemental information can also be found in Product 4007-P1, Texas Rural Rail Transportation Districts: Guidebook for Formation and Evaluation and Product 4007-P2, Texas Rural Rail Transportation Districts: GIS Information Manual.

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In this two-year study, the TTI researchers developed three products:
• a guidebook for the formation and evaluation of Rural Rail Transportation Districts (RRTDs);
• a GIS database showing the location of the RRTDs and rail network in Texas; and
• project selection criteria that help TxDOT evaluate each potential abandoned rail line to determine if the line is a candidate for state participation in its preservation.

These products are being fully utilized by TxDOT. The guidebook is a tool that TxDOT’s Multimodal Section rail planners provide citizen groups interested in forming a RRTD. The rail planners also utilize the guidebook as a reference tool. The GIS database is a valuable reference used by TxDOT district planners that have RRTDs in their districts. The project selection criteria help TxDOT’s rail planners determine an abandoned rail line’s viability and to develop preservation strategies. The criteria were also used as a resource by TxDOT’s Multimodal Section during the 2003 Legislative Session.

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YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS WELCOME!

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This research was performed in cooperation with the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). The contents of this report reflect the views of the authors, who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the data presented herein. The contents do not necessarily reflect the official view or policies of the FHWA or TxDOT. This report does not constitute a standard, specification, or regulation, nor is it intended for construction, bidding, or permit purposes. Trade names were used solely for information and not for product endorsement.