

Train Plan On 'Right Track'

Gov. Signs Deal With Railway

BY JEFF JONES
Journal Staff Writer

A planned \$75 million commuter-train service linking Belen, Los Lunas, Albuquerque and Bernalillo moved a little farther down the tracks Tuesday.

Gov. Bill Richardson on Tuesday signed a preliminary agreement with the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway concerning use and improvement of the railroad's tracks.

Project organizers said they're also days away from closing a deal to buy 10 brand-new double-decker railroad passenger cars for hauling metro-area commuters to and from work beginning next fall.

"I'm pleased to say we are on the right track. Get it?" Richardson joked Tuesday at a news conference in Albuquerque. "To have a train, you need tracks and you need cars. Today, I have important announcements about both."

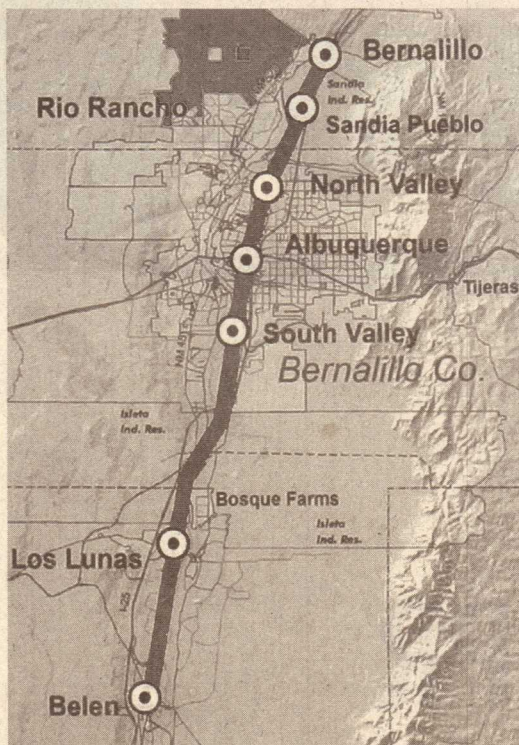
Richardson's memorandum of understanding with the Burlington Northern, which owns the 46-mile stretch of tracks between Belen and Bernalillo, roughly spells out the structure of two needed contracts between the state and the railroad.

Lawrence Rael, executive director of the Mid-Region Council of Governments, which is heading up the project, said he's hopeful the contract concerning the improvement of the tracks could be finalized in the next 30 to 45 days.

The agency hopes to finalize the contract for the actual use of the tracks by the end of the year, Rael added.

Richardson last summer kicked off plans to start commuter-rail service linking Belen to Bernalillo and Bernalillo to Santa Fe. Planners are tackling the Belen-to-Bernalillo leg as their first phase, and the state Transportation Commission this summer wrote a \$75 million check to get it built.

That money — a portion of



from PAGE A1

the \$1.6 billion transportation package approved in a special state legislative session last fall — is to pay for a string of new stations, a maintenance yard and the needed diesel locomotives and passenger cars. It also is to fund an estimated \$30 million to \$35 million in track and signal work needed on the rail line to get it prepared for a commuter service.

Actual operation of the train service is estimated to cost \$8 million to \$12 million per year. Rael has said planners hope to secure federal money to pay that tab for the first three years.

"Commuters taking the train will save thousands of dollars each year on gas, vehicle maintenance and insurance costs," Richardson said in a news release. "And fewer drivers will mean, hopefully, fewer accidents, and less stress."

Rael said the contract for the 10 new rail cars, which will cost \$1.8 million to \$2.5 million apiece, is expected to be completed sometime next week. The Council of Governments also is awaiting word on a bid for several used diesel engines that would pull those new cars.