

Beijing, Tianjin plan monthly train pass



A driver checks a high-speed train before it heads from Tianjin to Beijing South Railway Station on Jan 25.[Photo/Xinhua]

Beijing and Tianjin are planning a monthly pass for high-speed intercity trains linking the cities, as well as canceling expressway toll fees between the two cities, the mayor of Tianjin said on Monday.

The move will facilitate the integrated development of Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei province, an outline given in 2015 to improve transportation links in the area, while also moving some of Beijing's low-end industries to neighboring areas.

Wang Dongfeng, mayor of Tianjin, said the plan is to build a modern transportation system. He added that a unified smart prepaid traffic card, called Yikatong, already exists in 12 cities in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, and the government aims to expand its use to all cities in the area by the end of this year.

In addition to universal traffic cards and expressways, the proposal of a high-speed train network in the region was approved last year, with Beijing-Binhai New Area Intercity Railway expected to be completed by 2020.

The Beijing-Tianjin Intercity Railway was the first of its kind in China. Traveling at up to 350 kilometers per hour, passengers can commute between the cities in about 40 minutes on trains that depart every 10 to 15 minutes.

Officials from Tianjin's transportation bureau said they are still deliberating the monthly pass mechanism and a timetable is not available.

Potential benefactors are eagerly awaiting the implementation of the planned policies.

"We are looking forward to having monthly train passes," said Xiang Nan, the managing director of a Tianjin-based investment company that has offices in Beijing, downtown Tianjin and Binhai New Area of Tianjin. He has rented offices near the train stations to save time on commuting.

Xiang said that he and seven of his employees spend nearly 5,000 yuan (\$730) every month on commuting. "We hope the monthly pass can help frequent passengers save money."

In 2009, a prepaid express card was issued by railway authorities for Beijing-Tianjin intercity trains, offering exclusive entrance channels at stations so frequent travelers don't have to buy tickets in advance or wait in line before boarding.

In 2012, the express card was upgraded into a debit card that also works on about 20 intercity rail transit lines nationwide.

However, in both cases, passengers still have to pay the full price for each trip—54.5 yuan from Beijing to downtown Tianjin.

"If expressway toll fees were lifted, it would save us a lot of money," said Wang Rui, who drives between Tianjin, where she works, and Beijing, where she and her husband own a house.