As envisioned by President Obama, the proposed 3C high-speed passenger train system — connecting Cincinnati to Columbus and Cleveland — is all about investing in the future.

Once completed, the 250-mile corridor will travel through 12 economically distressed counties and help create thousands of direct and indirect jobs, supporters say. The rail line will serve more than 6.8 million people, or nearly 60 percent of Ohio's population.

Although the Obama administration awarded $400 million for the project from federal stimulus money in January, the hard work of making it a reality is just beginning — and one of the primary sticking points involves where the line should stop in Cincinnati.

Potential stops in downtown, Bond Hill, Sharonville, at Lunken Airport and at Union Terminal have all been considered, with no clear choice emerging yet. Where the terminal ultimately is located, 3C backers say, will determine whether the system is a success.

Originally, the state-advocated plan called for Cincinnati's 3C terminal to be located close to downtown to take advantage of its large base of potential customers.

Supporters thought that stop would be at Metro's Riverfront Transit Center, the $23 million station built as part of the Fort Washington Way redesign in 2003. But engineering issues — mainly the size of the trains and other concerns with eventual high-speed traffic — eliminated that option quickly. As a result, the long-criticized center remains used almost exclusively for bus parking, a far cry from its once-touted uses for light rail or commuter diesel rail.
A second option, which was the one that helped score the federal grant, was a route that veered east from Sharonville through the city’s Eastern Corridor near Lunken Airport, before ending near the Montgomery Inn Boathouse along the Ohio River.

When Adams Landing condo owners and other nearby residents objected to that plan, the project designated Lunken as the temporary stop until another could be found.

Lunken, located nearly nine miles from the downtown business district and the rail’s largest cache of customers, has been widely panned even as a temporary station.

Regional leaders would rather the temporary stop be in Sharonville or possibly Bond Hill, in preparation for a second stage of construction that would place the final site at or near Union Terminal.

“If it goes to Lunken, you’re basically shutting out the entire West Side of the city,” says City Councilman Chris Bortz, one of many who think the ultimate goal should be Union Terminal. “If it goes to Lunken, there is no way to get it back across the city to Union Terminal, there’s no way to eventually connect it to other Midwest rail. That would be a huge loss before the 3C even gets off the ground.”

Not only would it mean the loss of Union Terminal as an option, it could also mean the passenger rail option for Cincinnati would be unsuccessful, adds Vice Mayor Roxanne Qualls.

“If you’re looking at issues like access within the region to the most possible riders, those are downtown,” Qualls says. “The temporary terminal, whether it’s in Sharonville or Bond Hill, needs to be as close to downtown as possible and, ultimately, the final terminal needs to be downtown. Anything we agree upon, I think, has to include Union Terminal as the final stop. Lunken doesn’t afford us that option.”

The numbers seem to support Qualls’ assertion.

Unless there’s a downtown terminal, Amtrak — the rail giant that will manage the system — estimates Cincinnati’s ridership will be weak.

In a report circulating City Hall, the company projects only 65,534 patrons annually from a northern Cincinnati terminal as compared to nearly 200,000 from Cleveland with its centrally located station.

A Lunken location would cut that estimate even further, most agree, while an eventual Union Terminal location leads to increased ridership estimates.

Even the Union Terminal site, however, has its problems.
With the site already congested with commercial freight traffic, more money would be needed in the project’s second stage to shoehorn a passenger line into the Cincinnati landmark.

Still, that’s the option that makes the most sense both for the city and the viability of the overall 3C line itself, according to the Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana (OKI) Regional Council of Governments.

“I think that anybody who looks at it rationally sees that the train has to come as close to the city business district as possible for it to be viable, and that Union Terminal is the most attractive site. Now, if we get the state to agree with that, we’ve got to find a way to build a fourth main line into that area, and there are already issues of congestion,” says OKI Executive Director Mark Policinski.

Although Amtrak currently runs meager passenger service out of Union Terminal with only three stops a week, more passenger trains out of the Queensgate-Mill Creek corridor rails would be impossible without another rail line, he adds.

The tracks there — owned by CSX, Norfolk Southern and the Indiana & Ohio Railroad — are already subject to traffic jams, with about 100 freight cars using them daily. Long delays for the freight trains are already common.

Starting last summer, local leaders began examining that option. The regional Port Authority asked for a state study on adding a new line, which some estimates peg at $80 million.

The figure is less imposing than it seems, says Ken Prendergast, director of All Aboard Ohio, a 3C advocacy group based in Columbus.

“One of the things that gets lost in that discussion is how much of the $400 million grant money used would eventually be applied to the high-speed rail,” he explains. “The answer is: All of the proposed improvements would, except for the tracks that would be built from Sharonville to Lunken Field.”

Because the temporary Lunken option would require constructing a terminal and installing new rails, because current rails aren’t durable enough to support passenger traffic, a large portion of a fourth-line construction at Union Terminal could be offset by canceling the Lunken work.

“When you add it all up, with other factors, you could save around $30 million by not going to Lunken in the first place,” Prendergast says.

But ditching Lunken in favor of Union Terminal isn’t a local or state decision. Because Lunken was part of the grant application approved for federal stimulus dollars, any changes will need Washington’s approval.
That may be a tough sell, given the opposition 3C is encountering. Last week, Ohio Senate President Bill Harris (R-Ashland) sent a seven-page letter to Gov. Ted Strickland criticizing the project.

“Based on what I have learned so far, I am not convinced that the proposed 3-C Rail project put forth by your administration is the best use of our tax dollars,” Harris wrote.

Among Harris’ arguments: The first stage rail system will be slow, with a Cincinnati-to-Cleveland trip taking 6 hours; ridership will be low; and the state will ultimately be on the hook for $17 million annually in subsidies.

Harris isn’t alone. The Cincinnati Enquirer recently editorialized against the project, calling it a “boondoggle.”

Prendergast isn’t surprised at the opposition.

“There’s a lot of inaccurate information out there and it’s getting people upset unnecessarily,” he says. “The train’s not even going to start running until late 2012 at the earliest, three years from now. The actual schedule, the costs, how many people will be riding — that isn’t even close to being figured out yet.”

He cites a similar project in New Mexico, which started with trains only topping out at 35 mph. In the first year alone, he says, 500,000 riders used that line.

Policinski has heard similar arguments, especially concerning the train’s speed.

“I don't think anybody's going to be happy with 3C until it goes faster,” he says. “There are two ways of looking at it: Don't build until it gets faster, or the state’s concept of getting something in the ground and then working to improve it. I think it's smarter to get something going now.”

The Obama administration estimates that eventually the 3C line will offer three daily round trips at speeds up to 79 mph.

While planning doesn’t begin until this summer for 3C’s second, high-speed stage, building now seems to make more sense financially.

Sooner is better than later, Policinski says.

“If you wait five years and then try to build it, that $400 million goes up to $485 million because of inflation,” he adds. “Plus, because this is stimulus money, the state doesn’t have to have matching funds if they start applying this to work now. If the state waits, they’re going to have to provide up to 20 percent in matching funds. The price tag goes way up.”
3C RAIL OPTIONS will be discussed at an open meeting March 3 at 6:30 p.m. at Union Terminal in Queensgate. The meeting will be held in Tower A, accessed through the main rotunda. Get details here at All Aboard Ohio's web site (along with info about upcoming meetings in Cleveland, Columbus, Youngstown and Toledo).