



the

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High Speed Rail: Boon or Boondoggle?

High speed rail is like art: its beauty -- or lack thereof, is in the eyes of the beholder. Talk to proponents and it sounds like the Next Big Thing; talk to opponents and it sounds like the Next Big Boondoggle.

High speed rail is commonly defined as trains that carry passengers or freight and travel faster than 90 m.p.h. These trains are popular in Europe and Japan, where they were developed in the first half of the twentieth century and typically run at 130 m.p.h. or faster. But high speed rail is a new concept in the United States, which has favored and better funded air and automobile transportation over rail. Currently, the U.S. has only one high speed train, the Acela Express, which usually runs between 80 and 150 m.p.h. on the so-called "Northeast Corridor" that travels through Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. However, that may change.

Californians approved a \$9.95 billion bond to develop super high speed rail (trains traveling more than 200 m.p.h.) between some of the state's major cities. The California High-Speed Rail Authority says it will create 450,000 new, permanent jobs by 2035 and generate \$1 billion in "annual surplus revenue," while decreasing traffic congestion and pollution.

Leaders in Texas have developed a nonprofit "grassroots" corporation to develop a high speed rail system there, tentatively called the "Texas T-Bone." And many more states are jumping on the high speed train after President Barack Obama's offer earlier this year.

The President's Plan

In April, President Barack Obama pledged \$8 billion in federal stimulus monies (and has requested \$5 billion more over the next five years) to develop one hundred 600-mile high speed rail "corridors," or

networks, throughout the country. He says high speed rail will create jobs, decrease dependence on oil, ease highway and airport congestion, encourage urban and rural development, and improve the environment by reducing carbon dioxide output.

The Obama administration has outlined ten potential high speed "corridors" throughout the U.S., and Illinois is at the center of the biggest -- the Chicago Hub Network. It could connect Chicago, Milwaukee, the Twin Cities, St. Louis, Kansas City, Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, and Louisville.

All summer and early fall, states scrambled to get their applications in for the high speed rail stimulus dollars. Thirty-six states submitted 259 applica-

tions requesting more than \$57 billion, according to Ray LaHood, U.S. Secretary of Transportation and a former Illinois Congressman.

He and the president are among heavy-hitting high speed proponents with Illinois ties. Others include Senator Dick Durbin, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, and Governor Pat Quinn. In July, Daley and Quinn

joined representatives from Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin to sign an agreement to work together to develop 110 m.p.h. corridors throughout the Midwest.

Not so Fast

Not everyone is enamored with high speed rail. There are strong local disputes over it in our state's capital city where concern over the placement of high speed rails has caused a prolonged uproar that got Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan involved. Union Pacific Railroad, which wants to increase freight train service, has strongly pushed for the state to build a high speed track next to its track that runs through the heart of downtown Springfield. It would require expensive overpasses and underpasses which



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critics, including Springfield Mayor Tim Davlin, say would blight and harm the city. Days before Illinois submitted its application for federal high speed rail funds, Madigan introduced legislation to block efforts to build high speed tracks on this route. Critics of this route say another that's east of the city's downtown would be better.

Local issues aside, some opponents believe high speed rail isn't a good idea overall.

Those opponents include the Illinois Policy Institute, which describes itself as a "nonpartisan research organization that supports free market principles and liberty-based public policy initiatives." It's commonly referred to as a conservative think tank based in Chicago. Kristina Rasmussen, Executive Vice President of the Institute, says high speed rail will never pay for itself.

A report the Institute commissioned from the Cato Institute's Peter O'Toole, called "Taking Illinoisans for a Ride" (available on the Institute's Web site: www.illinoispolicy.org), estimates the Obama administration's high speed rail plan will cost \$90 billion. Based on Illinois' application for federal stimulus monies, the state will have to pay up to \$129 million to develop its portion.

"The state is broke... we can't afford it," says Rasmussen. "In order to fund it we're going to need to look at tax hikes in the near future." Other opponents say high speed rail will require governmental subsidies to operate and will charge high ticket prices to recoup costs.

In addition, "the average Illinoisan will take a round trip on high-speed rail once every 8.7 years," according to the Cato Report. That's not enough to justify its costs, says the Institute.

"We're being told that we need high speed rail to save the environment," adds Rasmussen. "The (U.S.) Department of Energy is saying that (for) intercity rides, cars are just as energy efficient as Amtrak trains, so if we're really looking to help the environment and reduce emissions, maybe... low emission cars are a better route."

High speed rail won't reduce congestion either, according to the Institute. The Cato report says California's super high speed rail will take "only 3.8 percent of traffic off of parallel roads."

Even if high speed rail works in Europe, "America isn't Europe" opponents say. "I think there's an attempt to mold Americans' lifestyles into what (politicians) see as politically correct," Rasmussen says. "If you don't like cars, you don't want people driving

them, you'd rather see them in rail."

Not Fast Enough

In between the proponents and the opponents is the Chicago-based Midwest High Speed Rail Association (members include Illinois cities on the proposed high speed route). It disputes numerous arguments opponents have against high speed rail, citing several sources, and says the federal government isn't planning for trains that travel fast enough. It's pushing for super high speed rail -- trains that travel up to 220 m.p.h. "on core routes."

At that speed, the Association theorizes the Midwest could operate as one big economic community, with workers and travelers hopping the train daily from, say, St. Louis to Chicago, since the ride would take slightly less than two hours. At that rate, Midwesterners could work in a city hundreds of miles away, it says.

Illinois has asked for federal stimulus funds to look at the feasibility of 220 m.p.h. trains, but it won't learn until winter whether or not that's approved. "One hundred ten miles per hour is more readily attainable due to current alignments and infrastructure being in place," says Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) spokeswoman Paris Ervin. "Two hundred twenty miles per hour would likely require new alignments, land acquisition, and lots of environmental work."

Full Speed Ahead

High speed rail is not a "one-size fits all option," says U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood. While 200 m.p.h. trains may work in one corridor, "90 or 110 m.p.h. service may make more sense" in another. That's why the administration is requiring "states to create corridor development plans that look at all potential alternatives."

But overall, high speed rail is the way to go, he says. "High speed intercity passenger rail -- when properly linked with other forms of public transit -- will help stem the increase in highway and airport congestion... Adding more cars, even low emission cars, will only make congestion worse."

And it's green, he says. "The (U.S.) Department of Energy found that today's modest intercity passenger rail system consumes one-third less energy per passenger-mile than automobiles. The energy savings of a new system should be even greater. Rail is the only mode of transportation that is capable of total reliance on electric power, which can come from a variety of green sources." LaHood cites the Acela train that runs through the country's northeastern

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megalopolis. "It already gets almost two-fifths of its propulsion power from hydroelectric sources."

Yes, high speed rail costs a lot, but LaHood says it will prove cost-effective. "Operational self-sufficiency is an important evaluation factor the (U.S.) Department (of Transportation) is taking into consideration in determining the merit of proposed projects and programs." When states applied for federal stimulus money for high speed rail, they had to outline how they would finance it "on an ongoing basis."

Critics say high speed rail will need large government subsidies to operate, while proponents point out that America's current forms of travel -- cars, planes, and trains, already receive government money. "Some 14 states currently subsidize (rail) corridor services," adds LaHood, "which, according to Amtrak in 2008, totaled \$165 million." The state of Illinois currently gives passenger rail \$28 million in subsidies. (By comparison, the federal government gave Amtrak nearly \$1.5 billion in fiscal year 2009 for operating, capital, and debt service costs, according to Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari. That's separate from the \$1.3 billion it will receive in federal recovery funds.) LaHood didn't have information about how much high speed rail might require in government subsidies.

Creating a "fully evolved" high speed national network will take "several decades," he adds. "There will be continual improvements that reduce trip times through increased speed and capacity, making passenger rail competitive with highway and air travel." Americans need to be patient "as improvements to our rail network are implemented, and remember that the high speed rail systems in Europe and Asia took decades to develop."

LaHood says his department will announce the winners of federal stimulus monies for high speed rail this winter.

Illinois' Proposal

Illinois applied for funds to develop high speed rail between Chicago and St. Louis; Chicago and Milwaukee; Chicago and Detroit; and with the State of Iowa it asked for funds to develop high speed from Chicago to Iowa City. The price tag is \$4.3 billion; the state asked the federal government to pay for about 97%, leaving \$129 million to be paid by the state, local communities, and Union Pacific Railroad, which owns land where high speed track will be constructed. The state has allocated \$400 million for high speed rail in the State Capital, "Illinois Jobs Now," program. IDOT spokeswoman Marisa Kollias said IDOT doesn't know what state subsidies high speed rail will require.

By comparison, California, whose state debt is notorious, asked for more than \$4.7 billion in federal funds (more than half of the \$8 billion available) and it's coughing up a 100% match with money from state, local and private sources.

Illinois' high speed trains would travel at 110 m.p.h. tops, which will reduce the now five-hour trip between Chicago and St. Louis to "just under four hours," according to Ervin. And IDOT projects trains would carry about 1.2 million riders, about three times more than the 356,000-plus riders that traveled on state-supported trains in fiscal year 2009.

In an October 2, 2009 *Wall Street Journal* article, Union Pacific spokesman Bob Turner said the railroad believes a high speed corridor between Chicago and St. Louis with 110 m.p.h. trains "can be done safely," but it will be a "complex" corridor with "dozens of sidings and crossovers."

**Illinois' High Speed Rail Applications**

To read Illinois' applications for federal stimulus monies, go to www.dot.state.il.us/stimulus/hspr.html.

When Illinois was a Leader in Rail

In the 1830s, when people traveled by foot, horse, stagecoach, or boat, Illinois developed a railroad.

Illinoisans wanted faster transportation to relieve their isolation and farmers wanted to get products to top markets in the south, according to Paul Angle's

"Here I Have Lived: A History of Lincoln's Springfield" (Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, 1971).

So, in 1837 the legislature, which included Abraham Lincoln, passed an internal improvements plan that focused on railroad development. Then the national economy tanked and Illinois scaled back its

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plans.

It built one short railroad -- the Northern Cross, to bisect the middle of the state. Originally it was to run from Quincy to Indiana; instead it ran from the Illinois River town of Meredosia to Springfield.

Construction began in 1837. According to a history of the Wabash Railroad on the University of Missouri at St. Louis Web site, this was the first railroad built in the Mississippi Valley. (The Northern Cross eventually became the Wabash.)

On February 15, 1842, the locomotive "Illinois" steamed from Meredosia into Springfield.

"Hundreds of people from the surrounding country gathered along the tracks to see this marvel..., this huge piece of machinery which some said was to replace oxen and horses -- they really could hardly believe that," wrote Helen Van Cleave Blankmeyer in "The Sangamon Country" (Sangamon County Historical Society, 1965).

Women and animals ran the other way, she said "As for the horses, they were so terrified that they backed buggies, carryalls and wagons this way and that, broke their traces and galloped madly through the town and across fields..."

After the Northern Cross started running thrice weekly between Springfield and Meredosia, a group of Springfieldians, including Mary Lincoln and a band, visited Jacksonville -- a \$2.50 trip that took two

hours and ten minutes one way, according to Angle.

The railroad proved disappointing, however. It wasn't sufficient to haul farmers' numerous loads of crops to the New Orleans market. And its tracks, engines, and railroad car were poorly built. Local blacksmiths weren't capable of repairing them. The result was railroad trips that were at times laborious and even injurious.

Pieces of the wooden rails curled as if pleading to the heavens for respite. These so-called "snake heads" occasionally poked through the train floor -- and unsuspecting riders, according to Angle. If they weren't jabbed by a snake head, passengers might be propelled "half the length of the car" by the jerky engines.

Those jerky steam devils devoured wood and water. When supplies ran out, the train stopped and riders had to chop wood or haul water, sometimes from far-flung wells.

A variety of mechanical problems stalled the railroad for hours at times.

A little more than two years after it entered Springfield, the poorly-made and worn-out Northern Cross came to a halt. The state had leased it to several operators and tried to sell it, with no luck. One last lessee substituted the broken-down locomotive with mules and hauled an occasional car of freight.

According to an article on the Illinois State Museum's Web site, by 1847 the state was able to offload it to a buyer for a fraction (one-fortieth) of its original cost.



Transitions

Michelle Saddler became the new Secretary of the Illinois Department of Human Services on October 11. She replaces **Dr. Carol Adams** who will become Illinois Representative to Africa in the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity's Office of Trade and Investment on January 1; until then she will serve as Senior Advisor to the governor. Saddler was formerly Quinn's Director of Policy.

On October 5, Governor Pat Quinn named **David Vaught** Director of the Governor's Office of Management and Budget. Previously Vaught was Quinn's Senior Advisor. He replaces **Ginger Ostro** who left the position to become the Senior Policy Advisor at the Illinois Student Assistance Commission.

