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Would Funds for High-Speed Rail Be Better Spent on Improving Existing Intercity Rail Service?

High-speed rail. For supporters, the words conjure visions of trains hurtling across the country at more than 200 miles per hour, bypassing congested highways and long airport security lines alike.

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The Obama administration in 2009 sought to take the first steps toward realizing this vision, identifying 10 corridors for potential high-speed rail projects and providing seed funds to get the projects rolling. However, facing opposition in Congress and in several states, the plans were dramatically scaled back; only two projects—in California and the Northeast Corridor—are still moving forward.

While many critics see superfast trains as an expensive boondoggle, some experts have a different complaint: Funds for jump-starting high-speed rail in the U.S. would be better spent on improving existing rail service—for instance, on signal systems, track alignments and station design. These upgrades can make passenger rail travel more efficient, frequent and reliable for millions of travelers.



Associated Press

An Amtrak Surfliner train near San Clemente, Calif.

On the other side are those who say investing in high-speed rail is worth it. High-speed rail will attract a host of new riders by providing an attractive alternative to driving or flying on many trips, and it will reduce our dependence on cars. What's more, they say, it is the kind of large-scale, bold endeavor for which Americans are known.

Kenneth Orski, a transportation consultant and former Department of Transportation official, makes the case for upgrading the existing rail infrastructure. Joshua L. Schank, president and chief executive officer of the Eno

Center for Transportation, argues for making high-speed rail a priority.

Yes: The Payoff Will Be Bigger

By Kenneth Orski

High-speed trains have been crisscrossing France and Japan for more than 40 years, and the idea that they would improve transportation in the U.S. has some merit.



Ken Orski

But until the U.S. regains its fiscal footing and has the financial resources to embark on a bold, capital-intensive endeavor, the federal government should forget about building a nationwide high-speed rail network and focus instead on modernizing existing rail infrastructure.

Considering that even modest upgrades in signaling, track alignments and station design could make train service more efficient, frequent and reliable for tens of millions of daily commuters, this strategy represents a much better use of limited federal resources at a time when the U.S. is struggling to recover from a severe recession.

Reshaping the Landscape

President Obama in 2009 announced an ambitious plan to give 80% of Americans access to high-speed rail within the next 25 years and seeded the initiative with \$8 billion in stimulus funds and an additional \$2.1 billion later on. That lofty vision, however, soon yielded to practical realities.

One such reality is demography. Unlike Western Europe and Japan, the U.S. lacks an urban pattern that favors high-speed rail connections. That pattern requires large traffic-generating city-pairs that are too far apart to favor travel by car, yet too close together to favor travel by air. In Europe and Japan those distances happen to fall in the range of 100 to 300 miles. The only corridor in the U.S. that fits this description is the Northeast Corridor, the train line running from Washington, D.C., to Boston

Proponents of high-speed rail say it doesn't matter because bullet trains have the potential to reshape land use by attracting new riders. But high-speed lines have failed to shape land use and create new population centers in France, Spain, and Japan over the past 40 years. Thus, there is no empirical basis to assume that they would do so in the U.S., especially given our dense network of highways. And if the goal is to make our metropolitan areas less auto-dependent, it is precisely better commuter-rail services that offer the greatest likelihood of persuading people to ditch their cars and take the train to work. Business travelers will continue to fly because it is quicker, and families going on vacation will continue to drive because of the convenience.

Where's the Money?

Another reality is that having high-speed trains share tracks with lumbering freight trains, as proposed by the Obama administration, is to invite serious operational conflicts and safety problems.

True high-speed rail service requires a dedicated alignment reserved exclusively for passenger trains. Such is the case with trains in France, Germany and

All Aboard!

Amtrak ridership (in millions) has grown by nearly half over the past decade, with most of the growth coming outside the Northeast Corridor



Making Tracks

Amtrak's 10 busiest lines in fiscal 2011 and their passenger counts

Northeast Corridor (Boston-NY-Wash.)	10,899,889
Pacific Surfliner (San Diego-L.A.-San Luis Obispo)	2,786,972
Capitol Corridor (San Jose-Oakland-Sacramento-Auburn)	1,708,618
Keystone Corridor (Harrisburg-Philadelphia-NY)	1,342,507
San Joaquin (Oakland/Sacramento-Bakersfield)	1,067,441
Empire (NYC-Albany-Niagara Falls)	1,023,698
Amtrak Cascades (Eugene-Portland-Seattle-Vancouver, B.C.)	852,269
Hiawatha (Chicago-Milwaukee)	819,493
Washington-Richmond-Newport News	557,528
Lincoln (Chicago-St. Louis)	549,465

Source: Amtrak
The Wall Street Journal

Japan—as indeed, with any train that runs at top speeds of 150 miles per hour or higher. But assembling these dedicated tracks, which must be relatively straight and level, in densely populated corridors where land holdings are fragmented would be extremely costly, if not impossible.

That brings us to the next reality, which is the uncertain prospect for further federal support, deemed essential for the future of the high-speed rail program. By denying administration requests for high-speed rail funds for three years in a row, Congress has sent a clear bipartisan signal that states shouldn't count on continued federal funding for these projects.

As such, only two projects in the Obama administration's once-vaunted high-speed rail agenda are moving forward—one in California and one in the Northeast Corridor. For practical, economic and political reasons, these two projects have morphed largely into programs of modest near-term upgrades in existing commuter-rail services in metropolitan areas along the proposed lines, confirming our premise that when money is tight, we should improve on what we already

have before building something new. Whether the "high speed" portion of those two ventures will ever materialize will remain an open question for a long time.

When the economy starts growing again, we might want to revive the idea of high-speed rail. Until then, prudence, good sense and the nation's well-being require that the federal government lower its sights.

Mr. Orski is a transportation consultant and the editor and publisher of Innovation NewsBriefs, a transportation newsletter. He served as associate administrator in the U.S. Department of Transportation in the 1970s. Email him at reports@wsj.com.

No: Rail Needs a Bold Leap

By Joshua L. Schank

The U.S. has invested so little in its passenger-rail system over the past 40 years that if it puts more money into it now—and that's a big if, considering there is no federal funding forthcoming—incremental improvements aren't going to cut it.

The only way rail service in this country will ever be able to compete effectively with air and automobile travel is if we run trains between select cities at high speed (defined as 124 miles or faster).

Here are four reasons why investing in high-speed rail is a good idea:

1) High-speed rail will attract enough riders to make a difference.



The Eno Center for Transportation

Joshua L. Schank

Consider travel between Chicago and St. Louis. There are 35 million annual trips in this corridor, and rail handles approximately 2% of them.

Driving takes a little more than five hours without traffic. The train is 5.5 hours. Flying time is an hour, and even with travel to and from the airport and long security lines adding another 1.5 hours of travel time, it still wins easily.

Currently planned incremental improvements in rail (costing \$1.5 billion) will bring the travel time down to four hours—not enough to beat out the plane and probably not enough to beat out the auto either, considering its convenience.

A new high-speed rail line, however, could conceivably bring the travel time between the two cities down to less than 2.5 hours. After factoring in the challenges with airport security and traffic, this travel time would be highly competitive with airplanes and autos for people throughout both regions.

2) High-speed rail will make our metropolitan regions less auto-dependent.

The U.S. transportation system is built around cars and gasoline, creating a system that is inaccessible for people who can't drive and leaving us vulnerable to economic shocks from oil prices on the global market.

Minor rail upgrades won't be enough to reduce our dependence on the automobile. For that, we need dramatic changes that will help reshape land use and give people more travel and housing choices in the urban areas where more than 80% of Americans now live.

High-speed rail directly into cities can do that by creating large intercity transportation hubs in places that can easily be made accessible by foot or public transit. As high-speed rail becomes prevalent, cities will bolster their public transit systems to improve access to these rail stations. This will strengthen downtowns and provide more options for getting around, while also reducing dependence on cars and oil.

3) High-speed rail will open up our rail system to competition and innovation.

There is no inherent reason why Amtrak, a quasigovernmental agency, should have a monopoly on operating intercity passenger rail in this country. There could be benefits to inviting private operators and competition into our rail system, as evidenced by the deregulation of the trucking, rail and airline industries.

But history has shown us that there will be no private-sector interest in operating passenger-rail service in the U.S. until a substantial public investment is made to improve the infrastructure to the point where it can be profitable. Much of Japan's high-speed rail network is now privately operated, but this happened only after the government built the infrastructure to run bullet trains.

4) High-speed rail will endure as one of our nation's great accomplishments.

There is serious concern at home and around the world about whether America is still capable of accomplishing great things. When we think of our greatest achievements as a nation—the moon landing, our national parks, and the interstate highway system, for example—they all happened many years ago.

There is no doubt that building a high-speed rail network in the U.S. is an ambitious plan fraught with major funding and operational challenges. Yes, money is tight, and fixing what we already have would provide a greater immediate return. But isn't that always the case? The U.S. can't afford to shy away from large investments out of fear. That is something second-rate countries do.

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