

Fleeing danger by high-speed rail



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Since 2008, I have become the Schleprock of national preparedness and disasters. As an Army officer I have traveled the world, but a cloud hovers over me as if I were the bad-luck character in the *Flintstones*.

While I was stationed in Houston, I experienced back-to-back Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. Then in 2011, at Fort Meade, Md., just outside Baltimore, Hurricane Irene struck. The words *wowsy wowsy woo woo* did not resonate until my first month in Boston, when Hurricane Sandy made its impact.

Last year, the Department of the Army sent me to the Federal Emergency Management Agency here in Dallas-Fort Worth, where I am the deputy defense coordination officer for emergency management. I don't expect a direct hit from a hurricane here, but other natural disasters can strike without warning.

People and federal agencies talk a lot about preparedness in early spring. The idea is to focus on you, your family and your community being prepared in the event of severe weather. Right here in Texas, people are killed or injured due to tornadoes, flash floods and severe thunderstorms. Although we cannot control where or when the next disaster will hit, we must take responsibility for preparing ourselves and families for emergencies.

Reflecting on the two deadly storms I experienced in Houston, I remember the chaos when the city evacuated. Cars littered the highways, and I remember thinking there has to be a better way to move a large population out of harm's way prior to a storm. That's why I believe high-speed rail from Houston to Dallas-Fort Worth should be seen as a matter of public safety and regional security.

We have heard business leaders, policymakers and investors make the case for a vibrant and labyrinth transportation system of buses, commuter and long-distance trains for economic viability and environmental sustainment. We know that Dallas and San Antonio and cities in between may be affected should the development of a high-speed rail system come to reality.

The positive impact on the environment and the economic development may outweigh many other concerns. But also consider how high-speed rail could completely change how effectively the region and the state prepare and respond to catastrophic events and weather. The region relies too much on the highway systems that all run toward San Antonio and Dallas during emergency operations.

Many states like Texas could mitigate some risks with cars being on the roadways if high-speed rail was a part of their traffic management and emergency operations tool kit. Even though no transportation will eliminate all risks and issues associated with bad weather and moving people out of harm's way, it will reduce and mitigate many of them.

By some accounts, high-speed rail every two hours reduces the need for more than 1,000 cars to be on the road during the same period. That could reduce the impact of additional automobiles in the cities where congestion is already insufferable. The impact during an emergency is even greater: High-speed rail can reduce the resources needed for 1 million cars set on the road for evacuation.

Eventually our regional and state emergency planners will realize that high-speed rail is not only a benefit for the economy and the environment, but also that it could save lives in case of a disaster.

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