

Not so fast, opponents say of rail service

By [MAGGIE BORMAN](#)

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is the second of three parts on progress in getting high-speed railroad service in Illinois.*

Some train supporters are slow to jump on high-speed rail service.

"I am an Amtrak rider but an opponent of high-speed rail," Illinois Policy Institute Executive Vice President Kristina Rasmussen said. "While it sounds like a nice program, it is full of false promises. I don't think our side is being heard very much: that it will not be cost-effective or energy-efficient or that it will not help reduce congestion, not to mention that high-speed rail will be horrendous for Illinois taxpayers when we are facing an \$11 billion budget deficit."

Proponents of trains envisioned at going 110 mph or even twice that fast on certain corridors, tout the service as a means to reduce dependence on foreign oil, lower carbon emissions, foster economic development and give travelers more choices.

The Illinois Policy Institute, a nonpartisan research organization that supports free market principles and liberty-based public policy initiatives, released a report July 9, "Taking Illinoisans for a Ride." It was compiled and written by Randall O'Toole, a senior fellow with the Cato Institute, a nonprofit public policy research foundation in Washington, D.C.

The full report may be read at www.illinoispolicyinstitute.org, but its one-page summary follows:

"The Problem: Would you pay \$1,000 so that someone could ride high-speed trains less than 60 miles a year? Probably not. Yet, that's what the Federal Railroad Administration high-speed rail plan is going to cost: at least \$90 billion, or \$1,000 for every federal income taxpayer in the country."

The report states that the supporters of the Federal Railroad Administration predict that when high-speed rail plan is completely built it will carry Americans 58 miles per person per year. By comparison, the average American travels by automobile more than 15,000 miles per year. The average Illinoisan will take a round trip on high-speed rail once every 8.7 years, and in actual practice, for every Illinois resident who rides high-speed rail once a month, more than 100 Illinoisans will never ride it.

Illinois' portion of the federal plan will cost more than \$1.2 billion, the report says. Adding proposed lines to Rock Island, Quincy and Carbondale will bring the total to \$3.2 billion, or \$280 for every Illinois resident, plus tens of millions more per year in operating subsidies.

The report notes that Illinois residents should not expect super-fast bullet trains for all this money.

In Illinois, like most of the rest of the country, the FRA is merely proposing to boost the top speeds of Amtrak trains from 79 mph to 110 mph (with average speeds of only 60 to 75 mph).

Moderate-speed trains like this are not going to relieve highway congestion, the report stated. Even California predicts that its true high-speed trains will take only 3.8 percent of traffic off parallel roads. Since traffic grows that much every two years, high-speed rail is an extremely costly and

ineffective way of treating congestion.

O'Toole also stated that high-speed rail is not good for the environment, as proponents say, noting that the Department of Energy says that in intercity travel, automobiles are as energy-efficient as Amtrak, and boosting Amtrak trains to higher speeds will make them less energy-efficient and more polluting than driving.

Under a heading called "Our Solution," the report says this:

"The Policy Institute report says that an expensive rail system used by a small portion of Illinoisans is not change we can believe in. Illinois, they say, should use its share of the \$8 billion in rail stimulus funds for incremental improvements to existing rail lines (including safer crossing gates and better signaling). It should not plan to purchase new locomotives and railcars for passenger service that will be both expensive to operate and harmful to the environment.

Further, the Policy Institute believes Illinois should ask the Federal Railroad Administration to not commit the federal government to funding expensive new high-speed rail lines such as the proposed lines in California or Florida. Illinois taxpayers should not be put on the hook for wasteful boondoggles elsewhere."

High-speed rail "is a technology whose time come and gone," the report says. "What might have been useful a century ago is today merely an anachronism that will cost taxpayers tens or hundreds of billions of dollars yet contribute little to mobility or environmental quality."

People who want to save energy should encourage the state to relieve the traffic congestion that wastes nearly 3 billion gallons of fuel each year, the report says.

And traffic signal coordination is another issue. The report says that, according to the Federal Highway Administration, three out of four traffic signals in the nation are obsolete and poorly coordinated with other signals. In 2003, the report notes, San Jose coordinated 223 traffic signals on the city's most congested streets at a cost of \$500,000. Engineers estimated this saved 471,000 gallons of gasoline each year, which translates to a 4,200-ton reduction in CO2 emissions. Other common sense, low-cost techniques can do more to relieve congestion and save energy than high-speed rail, and at a lower cost, according to the report.

"Illinois can do many things to cost-effectively improve transportation networks in ways that save energy, reduce accidents, and cut toxic and greenhouse gas emission. High-speed rail is not one of those things," the report summary concludes.

Proponents of high-speed rail, such as the Midwest High Speed Rail Association, are in agreement with the philosophy put forth by President Obama back in April.

"This is America. There's no reason why the future of travel should lie someplace else, beyond our borders," Obama said. "Building a new system of high-speed rail in America will be faster, cheaper and easier than building more freeways or adding to an already over-burdened aviation system, and everybody stands to benefit."

Association Executive Director Rick Harnish said those who are against high-speed rail must be afraid of change or are making money off the current system.

"Proponents of high-speed rail see the multiple benefits. Imagine that people could one day work in a metropolitan area such as Chicago with a fast commute from their home in Alton or Edwardsville; or live in Champaign and commute to St. Louis daily," Harnish said. "While that is

just one of the benefits of high-speed rail, it should not be underestimated. Travel in the non-urban Midwest can be very painful as there is no other way to get around but drive, and people want an affordable, efficient means of travel."

maggie_borman@thetelegraph.com