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Group: High-speed rail too expensive

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COLUMBUS -High-speed passenger rail between Cincinnati, Columbus and Cleveland will be costly and underused by Ohioans, according to a report released Wednesday by the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions.

The conservative research group based here recommends state government apply instead for its share of \$8 billion in federal stimulus transit money to upgrade existing rail lines, signals and crossing gates.

Gov. Ted Strickland proposed the so-called "3-C corridor" passenger rail project - to reactivate existing freight lines as commuter lines idle since 1971 - among Ohio's list of projects seeking federal stimulus money approved by Congress.

"The average American will ride these trains less than 60 miles per year," the study concludes, saying state taxpayers would foot the bill for future maintenance and operating costs.

An Amtrak study of potential ridership is expected next month.

The Ohio Rail Development Commission estimates one-way tickets between Cincinnati and Columbus or Columbus and Cleveland would cost \$20 to \$25 apiece.

Stu Nicholson, spokesman for the Ohio rail commission, said, "It wouldn't make sense for us to pursue a system that wasn't affordable to the average person."

But a true high-speed rail system connecting major cities in 33 states would cost more than \$500 billion, the Buckeye Institute estimates in its report, which can be found at www.buckeyeinstitute.org. Trains with a top speed of 110 mph will have average speeds of 55 to 75 mph, the report says. Not only will that attract fewer passengers, but such trains will be less energy-efficient and more polluting than cars.

"High-speed rail is an idea whose time has gone," said Randal O'Toole, a Cato Institute senior fellow and the report's author. "It is bad for taxpayers and bad for the environment."

O'Toole has always been an opponent of rail transportation, according to Nicholson.

"We haven't even gotten to high-speed rail in this country," Nicholson said of trains that travel at least 110 mph. "It's been pretty well established that rail in general, and passenger rail in particular, are probably the most environmentally sound forms of transportation. ... Would they rather we be saddled with high gasoline prices at the pump and no options but to drive?"