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 Commentary by **Petra Todorovich**

## High-Speed Rail Down, Not Out

 By Petra on April 13, 2011 | [0 Comments](#) [Share](#) [E-mail](#)

Yesterday, the budget deal hammered out over the weekend by Congress saw the light of day, revealing deep cuts for programs to expand rail infrastructure in the United States. The High-Speed Intercity Rail Program, which had been appropriated \$1 billion in the temporary bill passed last week to stave off a government shutdown, was slashed to zero and \$400 million was rescinded from the FY 2010 budget.

These cuts to the high-speed rail program are completely out of touch with continued and growing support for passenger rail in the United States. Just last week, 24 states, including 11 Republican governors, the District of Columbia, and Amtrak, half the country, applied for 98 rail projects totaling nearly \$10 billion, four times the amount available. Amtrak recorded its 17th straight month of year-over-year growth in ridership and is on track to set an all-time annual ridership record, which was set last year.

So why is high-speed rail getting such a bad rap among some Republicans in Congress and in the news media?

The news media smells blood in the water and has amplified the doubts of those who expect instant success on long-term, complex, multi-year infrastructure projects. Meanwhile, conservative think tanks, like the Reason Foundation, Heritage Foundation, and Cato Institute are waging an effective, coordinated war on the high-speed rail program. Their commentary is recycled in Ken Orski's weekly Innovation Briefs email, which highlights every commentator's doubts as evidence that the program is dying on the vine.

High-speed rail's critics know what advocates ignore at our peril - that a program reliant on annual congressional appropriations is vulnerable to attack. Who is surprised that a wave of newly-elected Republican members of Congress in 2008 seized the opportunity to single out one of President Obama's signature initiatives and attack it? Until high-speed rail has a dedicated source of funding, like the highway and transit programs, it will always be subject to annual budget battles and the changing political winds of Congress.

And advocates know what the critics ignore at their peril - that high-speed rail creates jobs, boosts economies, promotes regeneration in underperforming cities, and that economists agree that building infrastructure is key to our economic recovery.

While the FY 2011 appropriation is a setback, it should be seen as a minor one in light of the President's own modest, \$1 billion proposal for the high-speed program this year (Why did he set the bar so low in FY 2011? I have no idea.). The battle for next year's budget begins today for the President's ambitious, forward-thinking funding proposal of \$53 billion over 6 years for high-speed rail.

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Yesterday's budget news underscores the importance of securing dedicated funding for high-speed rail, such as a penny on the gas tax, a percent tax on oil imports, and a passenger rail ticket surcharge that would grow as the program grows over time. Until we secure dedicated funding for this program, it will be no better off than Amtrak has been in waging the annual budget battle in Congress.

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