

Spotlight Vol. 10 No. 7: "High-Speed Rail in America" at Regional Assembly 2011

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By [Petra Todorovich](#), Director, America 2050, RPA

Transportation has always been a hot topic at the Regional Assembly, but lately, it is catching more than its share of attention in popular media as well, because of the prominence of President Obama's high-speed rail initiative.

Not all the attention is good. Conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute are running regular Op-Eds in the Wall Street Journal explaining why federal investment in passenger rail is a boondoggle and why, in [Ronald Utt's opinion](#), Amtrak exemplifies "epic failure, gross mismanagement, and union featherbedding."

Meanwhile, RPA through its national initiative, America 2050, has been making the case that [high-speed rail is essential](#) to providing capacity for economic growth in the nation's most congested and productive megaregions — places like the Northeast Megaregion, California, and the Midwest.

Anytime a President adopts a signature initiative, it is bound to attract some unwanted partisan attacks. But high-speed rail has had a rough run since November, due mostly to a string of project cancellations in Ohio, Wisconsin, and Florida, where newly elected Republican governors decided not to support the project commitments of their predecessors and turned back federal funding.

April 4 was the deadline for states to apply for the relinquished \$2.4 billion funding that would have gone to the Florida high-speed rail project. The subsequent grant awards of the U.S. Department of Transportation will provide some indication of where the program is going - and its chances for success when Congress debates the President's ambitious 2012 budget proposal of \$8 billion for the high-speed rail program next year.

At the Regional Assembly, we'll convene some of the key actors in this story — Karen Rae, the Deputy Administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration, which is leading the federal high-speed rail program; Al Engel, Vice President for High-Speed Rail at Amtrak; Joan McDonald, Commissioner, New York State Department of Transportation; Peter Gertler, Chair of High-Speed Rail Services at HNTB Corporation; and Fabio Casiroli, Professor of Transport Planning, DPA Milan Polytechnic, and Founder, Systematica, lending an international perspective.

I will be moderating the panel and will ask the panelists, where do we go from here?

We will focus on two corridors with the greatest potential to achieve dedicated, high-speed rail service: California and the Northeast. California, which has already received nearly \$3 billion in federal funding is starting construction on a 120-mile segment in the Central Valley, stretching from Fresno to north of Bakersfield.

The mainline Northeast Corridor, the busiest passenger rail corridor in the country, has received little federal high-speed rail funding to date, but is now vying for the Florida money. Amtrak has proposed an ambitious, dedicated high-speed rail vision for the Corridor that would slash trip times and dramatically increase capacity.

The success of these ambitious plans depends on aligning politics, funding, financing, and public support over a sustained period of time. Leadership from the Tri-State region, where business, labor, and environmental interests have come together to support vital transit megaprojects in the recent past, will be vital to crafting a nimble and coherent political strategy at the national level and in the Northeast Corridor.