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Are proposals for high-speed rail a boondoggle?

By Randal O'Toole

On June 17, the Federal Railroad Administration asked states for proposals for spending \$8 billion of stimulus money that Congress allocated to high-speed rail. This raises a question: Would you pay \$1,000 so that someone — probably not you — can ride high-speed trains less than 60 miles a year?

That's what the FRA's high-speed rail plan is going to cost: at least \$90 billion or \$1,000 for every federal income taxpayer.

That's only the beginning. Count on adding \$400 per taxpayer for cost overruns. Taxpayers will also have to cover operating losses: Amtrak currently loses \$28 to \$84 per passenger in most of its short-distance corridors.

The FRA plan also has huge gaps, such as Dallas to Houston, Jacksonville to Orlando, and the entire Rocky Mountains. Once states start building high-speed rail, expect local politicians to demand these gaps be filled at your expense. And don't be surprised when the government asks for billions more in 30 years to rebuild what will then be a worn-out system.

What would we get for all this money? Unless you live in California and maybe Florida, don't expect superfast bullet trains. In Michigan and most of the rest of the country, the FRA is merely proposing to boost the top speeds of Amtrak trains from 79 miles per hour to 110 m.p.h.

A top speed of 110 m.p.h. means average speeds of only 60-70 m.p.h., which is hardly revolutionary. Many American railroads were running trains that fast 70 years ago.

The pro-rail Center for Clean Air Policy predicts that if the FRA's system is completely built, it will carry Americans 20.6 billion passenger miles a year in 2025. That sounds like a lot, but, given predicted population growth, it is just 58 miles per person.

Michigan's portion of the plan will cost more than \$750 million. Proposed branches to Grand Rapids/Holland and Port Huron would bring the total above \$1.5 billion or \$230 for every Michigan resident, plus more than \$50 million per year in operating subsidies. Michigan taxpayers will get little return for any state funds invested in this project: The average Michigander will take a round trip on the trains once every 12 years.

Most of the rest of your \$1,000 will go to California, which wants to you to help pay for a costly bullet train. Even this train will do little to relieve congestion or save energy; mainly it will just fatten the wallets of rail contractors.

Who will ride these trains? We can get an idea by comparing fares between New York and Washington, D.C.

As of this writing, \$99 will get you from Washington to New York in 2 hours and 50 minutes on Amtrak's high-speed train, while \$49 pays for a moderate-speed train ride that takes 3 hours and 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, relatively unsubsidized and energy-efficient buses cost \$20 for a 4-hour-and-15-minute trip with leather seats and free Wi-Fi. Airfares start at \$119 for a one-hour flight.

Who would pay five times the price to save less than 90 minutes? Those who value their time that highly would pay the extra \$20 to take the plane. The train's only advantage is for people going from downtown to downtown — bankers, lawyers, government officials and other high-income people who hardly need subsidized transportation.

Nor is high-speed rail good for the environment. The Department of Energy says that, in intercity travel, automobiles carry an average of 2.4 people, which makes them as energy-efficient as Amtrak. The Department adds that boosting Amtrak trains to higher speeds will make them less energy-efficient and more polluting than driving.

Michigan should use its share of rail stimulus funds for safety improvements such as grade crossings, not for new trains that will obligate taxpayers to pay billions of dollars in additional subsidies.

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