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Editorials

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If Congress can't cut Amtrak, it isn't serious

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One of the most effective strategies in politics is to scuffle up a monstrous scenario to get members of Congress to preserve the monster program they already have.

Ronald Utt of the conservative Heritage Foundation contends that is the case with the president's out-of-nowhere proposal for "high-speed rail" for every burg.

Since the governors of Ohio, Wisconsin and Florida rejected billions of dollars in federal grants for loony high-speed rail schemes, it is now history, Utt said in the Wall Street Journal.

Thus, the president has shifted his costly "transformational" rail dreams to Amtrak, "where only Congress gets to decide."

Amtrak, Utt argued, is a "hapless enterprise" with a record of "epic failure, gross mismanagement and union featherbedding."

The plan Congress will face "is now little more than an extravagant Amtrak bailout plan costing

\$53 billion over six years," Utt wrote.

It's not worth another \$53 billion.

- Amtrak accounts for less than one-half of 1 percent of all interstate passenger movement, and 40 percent of that takes place in the Northeast Corridor. Even there, the railroad has only a 6 percent share of the market. (Highways have 89 percent.)
- In 2010, when Amtrak ridership returned to the record 2008 level, it amounted to 28.7 million total - "about 10 million fewer passengers than went through the Phoenix airport in 2009."
- And Amtrak receives "the highest per-passenger federal subsidy of any mode: \$237.53 per 1,000 passenger-miles compared to \$4.23 per passenger-miles for commercial aviation," Utt said.

Just because governors rejected an ever larger lunacy doesn't mean that members of Congress should preserve the one they have.

Tad DeHaven of the Cato Institute put it this way in June of 2010:

"Amtrak has been providing second-rate train service for almost four decades, while consuming almost \$40 billion in federal subsidies. The system has never earned a profit and most of its routes lose money."

Congress is running a \$1.65 trillion deficit this year and has run up a \$14.4 trillion national debt.

There is no plausible excuse for putting another \$53 billion into a rickety railroad that has cost the taxpayer \$40 billion already.

Members of Congress who can't cut Amtrak should not be in charge of handling other people's