

Don't get railroaded by FRA's plan

By By RANDAL O'TOOLE/Special to the Courier & Press

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Last week the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) released criteria for applications from Indiana for spending its share of the \$8 billion of stimulus money that Congress allocated to high-speed rail. Which 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 in the country.

And that's only the beginning. Count on adding \$400 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 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.

And unless you live in California and maybe Florida, don't expect superfast bullet trains. In Indiana 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 mph.

A top speed of 110 mph means average speeds of only 60-70 mph, 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.

Indiana's portion of the plan will cost more than \$1.8 billion, or nearly \$300 for every Indiana resident, plus more than \$120 million per year in operating subsidies. This will pay for lines connecting Chicago with Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Louisville — meaning much if not most of the travel will be out-of-state people going to out-of-state destinations. Indiana taxpayers will get little return for any state funds invested in this project.

Most of the rest of your \$1,000 will go to California, 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.

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

Meanwhile, relatively unsubsidized and energy-efficient buses cost \$20 for a four-hour-and-fifteen-minute trip. Airfares start at \$119 for a one-hour flight.

Who would pay five times the price to save less than 90 minutes? The train's only advantage is for people going from downtown to downtown — bankers, lawyers, 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 are as energy-efficient as Amtrak, and that boosting Amtrak trains to higher speeds will make them less energy-efficient and more polluting than driving.

An expensive rail system used mainly by a wealthy elite is not change we can believe in. Indiana 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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