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High Speed Rail: Railroading New Mexico Taxpayers

(Albuquerque)— Congress recently approved \$8 billion for President Obama's high-speed rail program without ever asking what the total cost would be, how to pay for it, or who would ride the trains.

The administration's proposed high-speed rail plan will cost \$1,000 for every federal income taxpayer, yet the average American will ride high-speed trains less than 60 miles a year, says a new report from the Rio Grande Foundation. The report says that the average New Mexico resident will rarely use high-speed trains.

The federal government is proposing to build true high-speed rail lines—with trains going faster than 120 miles per hour—only in California and Florida. In most of the rest of the country, it is merely proposing to upgrade existing freight tracks to boost top Amtrak speeds from 79 to 110 mph.

Trains with a top speed of 110 mph will have average speeds of just 55 to 75 mph. Not only will that attract few people out of their cars, says the report, such trains will actually be less energy efficient and more polluting than driving.

The federal government left New Mexico out of its plans entirely. But New Mexico's share of local proposals for moderate-speed trains Albuquerque to Denver are likely to cost \$400 for every New Mexico resident—and true high-speed trains would cost at least \$7,500 for every New Mexican.

“High-speed rail is an idea whose time has gone,” says Randal O’Toole, a Cato Institute senior fellow and the report’s author. “It is bad for taxpayers and bad for the environment.”

Premium fares and a downtown orientation means that the main people riding these trains will be bankers, lawyers, government officials, and other high-income people who hardly need subsidized transportation. Not only will each federal income taxpayer pay \$1,000 for someone else to ride the train;

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that someone probably earns more than the average taxpayer.

The administration has compared its high-speed rail plan with President Eisenhower's Interstate Highway System. But interstates were paid for entirely out of gas taxes and other user fees, not general taxes, and the average American travels on interstates 4,000 miles per year. By comparison, general taxpayers will pay for the cost of building and much of the costs of operating high-speed trains that will be used mainly by the wealthy elite.

The report urges New Mexico to use its share of federal high-speed rail stimulus money for safety improvements such as grade crossings and signaling systems, but not for new trains that will obligate taxpayers to pay millions of dollars in annual subsidies.

The complete report can be downloaded at:

http://www.riograndefoundation.org/downloads/rgf_nm_high_speed_rail.pdf

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