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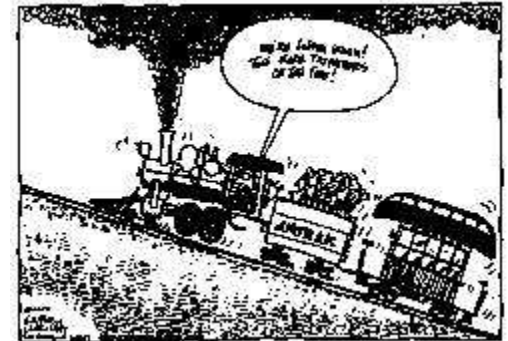


## Randal O'Toole: High speed spending

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Would you pay \$1,000 so that someone – probably not you – can ride high-speed trains 58 miles a year? That's what the Obama Administration's high-speed rail plan is going to cost every federal income taxpayer in the country.

One thousand dollars per taxpayer is only the beginning. Count on adding \$400 for cost overruns. Taxpayers will also have to cover operating losses: Amtrak loses \$28 to \$84 per passenger in most of its short-distance corridors. In 2001, it lost the most - \$84 per passenger in the state-subsidized Raleigh-Charlotte corridor.



*Cagle Cartoons*

The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) plan includes huge gaps, such as Dallas to Houston, Jacksonville to Orlando, and the entire Rocky Mountains. Once we start building high-speed rail, you can expect local politicians to demand these gaps and others be filled at your expense. And don't be surprised when the government asks you for another \$1,000 or so in about 30 years to rebuild what will then be a worn-out system.

What would you get for all this money? Unless you live in California, don't expect super-fast bullet trains. In Florida the FRA is considering trains with top speeds of 125 miles per hour. In most of the rest of the country, the FRA is merely proposing to boost top speeds of Amtrak trains from 79 to 110 m.p.h.

A top speed of 125 m.p.h. means an average speed of only 75 to 85 m.p.h., which is hardly revolutionary. Many American railroads were running trains nearly 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 passenger.

Florida's portion of the plan will cost at least \$11 billion, or \$600 for every Florida resident, plus tens of millions more per year in operating subsidies. For that, the average Floridian will take a round-trip on the train only once every 15 years.

Most of the rest of your \$1,000 will go to California, which wants you to help pay for a

220-m.p.h. 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, DC.

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 with leather seats and free Wi-Fi. Airfares start at \$119 for a one-hour flight.

Few people who pay their own way will spend an extra \$79 to save an hour and twenty-five minutes of their time. But anyone who values their time that highly would be willing to pay an extra \$20 to save an hour by taking the plane. The train's only advantage is for people who are going from downtown to downtown.

Who works downtown? Bankers, lawyers, government officials, and other high-income people who hardly need subsidized transportation. Not only will you pay \$1,000 for someone else to ride the train; that someone probably earns more than you.

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.

High-speed rail will cost you a lot of money and provide little benefit to anyone except a few bankers, lawyers, and bureaucrats. That's not change we can believe in.

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