

 [Print this article](#)

Amtrak Getting New Look, Like Highways in 1950s

Cleon Rickel

Published 09/10/2009 - 9:18 p.m. CDT

A year ago, who ever heard of Amtrak other than a small group of dedicated riders who often put up with odd schedules, indifferent service and delayed departures?

But what a difference a new administration and \$8 billion make.

Forty states and the District of Columbia have scrambled to submit 278 applications for more than \$108 billion for high-speed rail proposals.

Several new groups dedicated to – and in some cases, skeptical of -- high-speed rail have popped up and suddenly, passenger rail travel and high-speed rail have become one of the hot topics of conversation.

“High-speed has become the new buzz word,” said Brian Weiler, multi-modal director for the Missouri Department of Transportation’s rail passenger program.

“It’s brought new life into a nearly dead situation,” said Ron Kaufman, Kansas Department of Transportation’s spokesman and author of a KDOT study on high-speed rail.

A new regional passenger rail group is holding a high-speed rail symposium in Jefferson City in two weeks and Weiler, who will be one of the main speakers, said that the pace of people and groups who have been signing up is brisk.

Like the other states, Missouri and Kansas have submitted applications for the high-speed rail money.

Missouri’s seeks \$139 million for improvements to the Union Pacific lines between Kansas City and St. Louis that Amtrak trains use, plus another \$50 million as part of a consortium of upper Midwest states seeking new train locomotives and rolling stock.

Kansas has submitted two applications and will submit a third in about a month.

Kansas is asking for \$8.1 million for track improvements on the Southwest Chief route between Emporia and Barclay, Kansas. That is an increase in its request because the costs were found to be higher, Kaufman said. The other application is for \$500,000 to prepare a management plan to extend the Heartland Flyer, which goes from Fort Worth, Texas, to Oklahoma City, with connections to Kansas City’s Union Station..

The third application will be for \$10 million for signal and crossing upgrades to allow increases in speeds along the proposed extension.

However, Eric Morris, UCLA researcher and blogger on the New York Times’ Freakonomics Web site, writes that most of the high-speed proposals aren’t high speed.

Even if passenger speeds are increased as states propose, they will still be slower than passenger trains operated by railroads more than 50 years ago.

Only California and Florida are proposing true high speeds and only California’s plan approaches the speeds of Japanese and European high-speed trains, he said.



Amtrak Acela Express train, led by locomotive #2035, at New Haven Union Station in New Haven, CT.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cleon Rickel

Email:
editor@kctribune.com

Morris writes he likes the idea of high-speed rail but the costs of what's been proposed would far out-weigh the benefits.

Even the proposals offered by the other states would be too expensive for the benefits and wouldn't be fast enough to be "game-changing" in attracting more passengers, he said.

However, Bruce Richardson, president of the United Rail Passenger Alliance, a national rail passenger group, said small but steady improvements in speed, safety and reliability is the best strategy for achieving President Obama's high-speed goals.

Like flying, the actual travel tends to be the shortest part of the trip, he said.

Air travelers spend more time going through security checks, checking baggage, waiting on the runway and then getting out of the destination airport and finishing the trip, he said.

Rail passengers face many of the same issues, he said. Improving the process will speed up rail passenger travel, Richardson said.

For example, there's a quarter-mile of trackless space between the main San Antonio rail yard and the San Antonio passenger depot, Richardson said.

For whatever reason, that quarter-mile track was taken up, he said.

Because of that missing quarter-mile link, it takes passenger trains nearly an hour to detour to get to the station, he said.

"You would save two hours and the money you pay your train crews if you replace that quarter mile," Richardson said.

Chicago has the heaviest freight and passenger rail traffic.

"When you untangle that bowl of spaghetti at Chicago you're going to see quite a bit of improvement, even in your own area," Richardson said.

Rebuilding the nation's passenger rail system will be as important as building President Eisenhower's interstate highway system, he said.

One retired federal railroad executive likens Obama's high-speed rail initiative to an "Interstate II," Richardson said.

It's not a bad comparison, he said.

Working on the rail system will take as long as it took – perhaps longer – to build and connect the interstate highway system, he said.

"The states do a few demonstration projects, maybe fill in between existing routes," he said. "It took 40 years to finish the interstate system, it will take 40 or 50 years for high-speed rail."

However, trying to equate President Obama's high-speed rail plan to President Eisenhower's Interstate Highway System is a fallacy, writes blogger Randal O'Toole, senior fellow of the libertarian Cato Institute. .

There are crucial differences between interstate highways and high-speed rail, O'Toole said. The cost of building the highways was borne by highway users through fuel taxes and other fees, but rail passenger service can't be supported by fares and would be borne by all taxpayers, he said.

Before Congress approved the Interstate Highway System, it had a good idea how much it would cost. In contrast, Congress approved \$8 billion for high-speed rail without knowing the total cost, which is likely to be at least \$90 billion, he said. High-speed rail would actually increase energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, he said.

The \$8 billion in high-speed funds should be invested in safety improvements to existing tracks, not in new trains and new routes, O'Toole said.

In its grant requests, Missouri's emphasis is "show you."

Weiler said his state's requests are practical and show results fast – indeed, Missouri, Amtrak and Union Pacific

have worked out their proposals together and have already started work.

And communities along the St. Louis-Kansas City routes have been sprucing up or improving their own passenger stations, he said.

Richardson said that any proposals for high-speed rail should include freight railroads – and the freight railroads are eager to be included, he said.

The railroads killed off their passenger lines years ago and, since then, those executives loathed efforts to restart passenger service and gave grudging support to Amtrak, he said.

Now, railroad executives have no memory of -- and no prejudices against -- passenger trains, Richardson said.

“The freight guys, they understand ‘we can get a lot of improvements and somebody else is going to pay for it,’” he said. “What we’re giving up is that we’ll have more passenger trains on our systems.”

“A lot of freight guys think that it’s time for passenger trains because they’re going to make money from this.”