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Midwest, Calif. front runners for \$8B in rail cash

By MICHAEL TARM – 17 hours ago

CHICAGO (AP) — High-speed rail plans in California and the Midwest appear to be front runners in the race for \$8 billion in stimulus cash based on federal criteria released Wednesday that favor projects with established revenue sources and multistate cooperation.

California voters last November approved nearly \$10 billion in state bonds that could be combined with federal money to build 800 miles of high-speed track. Eight Midwest states have cooperated closely to promote a network, with Chicago as its hub, that would join 12 metropolitan areas within 400 miles.

Karen Rae, deputy administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration, stopped short of naming favorites during an interview with The Associated Press in Chicago, but she praised Midwestern states for their cooperation and pointed to California's bond issue.

"California by having the bond has a step up," said Rae, who hastened to add that many factors would determine final distribution of the stimulus money.

The FRA's 68 pages of often technical rules also seek projects that would reduce regional highway and airport congestion and create jobs, especially among lower income Americans.

Mehdi Morshed, executive director of the California High-Speed Rail Authority, was upbeat about the federal guidelines, saying he did not believe anything in them might undermine his state's bid. "If you expect to get billions of dollars from the federal government, they are reasonable criteria," he said.

Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon, a strong proponent of the Midwest network, said he was encouraged by the Wednesday release, in part because of the emphasis on regional cooperation.

"Clearly we were benefited by the criteria that were laid out today," Nixon said. "We are not the caboose on this train."

Lollygagging states will have to move fast to try to grab a share of the funds, with the FRA guidelines setting a July 10 deadline for pre-applications and an Aug. 24 deadline for most final application papers. The FRA said it intends to release the first round of grants by mid-September.

Any region can present a long-range plan, but the FRA has highlighted 10 major corridors that cover lines in Texas, California, Florida, the Pacific Northwest, the Midwest, the Gulf Coast, the Southeast, northern New England, Pennsylvania and New York.

The guidelines released Wednesday call for detailed cost-benefit analyses to be submitted with applications, but Randal O'Toole, of the free-market oriented Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., said deadlines coming so quickly one after another will make it impossible to scrutinize the submissions.

"It's hard for me to imagine federal authorities are going to take these analyses seriously," said O'Toole, a longtime critic of such government-backed programs. "There's no time for that."

President Barack Obama laid out plans in April for high-speed rail he said would help dramatically change the way Americans travel.

Even advocates concede the \$8 billion isn't nearly enough for a wholesale change in passenger-train service, something that would require hundreds of billions more. But backers still hope the stimulus money, as well as \$1 billion a year for five years proposed for high-speed rail in the 2010 federal budget, will lead to more funding down the road.

The FRA's Rae assured a group of about 200 transportation officials who were gathered in Chicago for a rail conference that the stimulus cash is just the beginning of a long-term national push.

"This is not about stringing rail across a region for no purpose," she said.

Improvements to tracks and equipment on many existing routes could enable Amtrak trains to reach top speeds of 110 miles per hour. The only U.S. service currently meeting the FRA's 110 mph threshold to qualify as a true high-speed train is Amtrak's Acela Express route between Boston and Washington, D.C.

The Midwest project foresees upgrades of three existing routes: Chicago-St. Louis; Chicago-Madison, Wis., via Milwaukee; and Chicago-Pontiac, Mich., through Detroit. Later, they'd upgrade a St. Louis-Kansas City, Mo. route. The governors of the eight Midwest states — Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio and Wisconsin — wrote Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood in April appealing for money for the region, one of the hardest hit by the recession.

The California authority has said it hopes to build 800 miles of track for high-speed trains and would ask for federal funds to work on lines between San Francisco and San Jose and Los Angeles and Anaheim.

On the Net:

- Federal Railroad Administration on high-speed rail: <http://www.fra.dot.gov/us/content/31>
- Midwest Regional Rail Initiative: <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/passengerrail/onepaggers>



Photo 1 of 2



RESEND of a graphic that first moved April 16, 2009; graphic shows designated high-speed rail corridors



Map



