



Will Republican Revolt on High-Speed Rail Projects Derail Obama's Plan?

\$8 Billion Stimulus Project Mired in Political Challenges

By HUMA KHAN

Dec. 13, 2010

Many Americans soon could see European-style [high-speed trains](#) in their backyards, but a wave of [Republican](#) gubernatorial victories means the project -- once touted by Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood as a "game changer" -- faces many obstacles ahead.

Last week, the Department of Transportation yanked away nearly \$1.2 billion in funds from Wisconsin and Ohio after incoming governors in both states said they would not continue the project, and distributed it to 13 other states where high-speed rail projects are moving forward as planned.

All eyes now are on Florida, where Gov.-elect Rick Scott threatened during his campaign to oppose any rail plan that would require subsidies after federal dollars ran out.

But since winning office, the governor-to-be has been relatively mute on the subject and a DOT spokesperson said the agency is working actively with the state to move the project along.

Florida also received \$342.3 million of the money that was redirected from Wisconsin and Ohio.

Scott's office said the incoming governor hasn't yet made a decision on how he will proceed.

"The governor-elect is not going to make any decision until he's had a chance to thoroughly review an updated feasibility study on the project due in February, and until he's had time to gauge the willingness of the private sector to fund ongoing operations and maintenance," spokeswoman Amy Graham said in a statement.

The governor-elects of Ohio and Wisconsin also made their opposition to the project key parts of their campaigns.

Wisconsin actually suspended work that already was underway, putting the state in a breach of contract with the federal government. The state was set to

receive the bulk of the money, and outgoing Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle said it would create 5,500 jobs.

But Gov.-elect Scott Walker commended the suspension of the work and blasted the high-speed rail project as "runaway government spending."

Walker argued, as many conservatives do, that the state couldn't afford the Madison-to-Milwaukee rail line and that he would have preferred to get the money to repair roads and bridges.

Proponents of the plan say high-speed railroads are needed to make the United States more competitive and to accelerate business and tourism.

"These funds were allocated, were enacted, were provided to build high-speed rail," said Art Guzzetti, vice president for policy at the American Public Transportation Association. "We are just getting started in a major quest and it's going take this and much more to get the job done."

Of the \$787 billion in stimulus funds passed by Congress last year, \$8 billion was allocated for high-speed rail and another \$1 billion per year for five years had been requested in the federal budget to accelerate the program.



ADVERTISEMENT

PRINT POWERED BY



But opponents say at a time when the federal government has bigger fish to fry, how states tackle their local infrastructure should be left up to them, not the federal government.

"Let's take one tiny step toward fiscal sobriety," said Daniel Mitchell, a senior fellow at the CATO Institute, a libertarian think-tank. "The federal government is like a crack dealer, and he's giving states a free hit of crack to get them hooked. And then of course, in the long run, the cost of the crack gets worse. In the long run, you are going to wind up losing out."

Mitchell argued that trains are a "money-losing scheme" in the long run for states because they have to pay for maintenance and upkeep themselves once the federal dollars stop flowing. Supporters of high-speed rail argue that applies for all public infrastructure, not just trains.

The bulk of the money for the project is being sent to the coasts, namely California and New York. Governors in both states have expressed their willingness to work closely with the federal government to develop infrastructure and advance the train system.

The first part of the project includes upgrading railways like the one that carries travelers between Washington and Boston on America's only high-speed train, Amtrak's Acela. Next up is creating new high-speed corridors in places like California, the Pacific Northwest and the Southeast.

Insiders say the project got off to a rocky start. Despite the hefty investment from the federal government, the announcement early last year came at a time states were not quite ready to take projects off the ground.

But proponents of the plan say the stimulus jumpstarted states into moving quickly from the planning stage to the implementation stage.

"The stimulus came at a very critical time. The transit systems around the country have suffered from the economic downturn," Guzzetti said. "The stimulus was a real lifesaver for many of them."

Another challenge is that the Transportation Department hasn't previously implemented the large-scale, high-speed passenger rail program called for in the stimulus and lacks the experience necessary in overseeing its design

and construction, as the agency acknowledged in a [report](#) last year.



ADVERTISEMENT

PRINT POWERED BY

