



Cato Institute speaker: High-speed rail plan off track

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If you're a fan of the plan to bring high-speed rail to Rochester, Randal O'Toole says, not so fast.

An economist who studies transportation and a senior fellow with conservative think tank The Cato Institute, O'Toole spoke Monday night about trains, ridership and costs during a presentation titled "Transportation Choices for Our Future" at the Rochester International Event Center.

The only real high-speed trains in the United States, O'Toole said, is the Acela trains that serve routes between Washington, D.C., New York and Boston.

"It serves a corridor of 40 million people," he said. "It's the densest corridor in America."

That said, the service only makes a profit as long as capital costs, maintenance costs and some operating costs are shifted to other trains or not counted, O'Toole said.

Like many passenger train projects, operation of the trains can only be called a success if you ignore how highly they are subsidized by the government, he said. And the same would be true of the proposed Zip Rail train being discussed between Rochester and Minneapolis.

But Olmsted County Commissioner Ken Brown has said that the Zip Rail proposal is different from other rail projects because it would not require government subsidies to operate.

"We have always said and stand by that it will require no subsidies, it will make money, it will be profitable on an operation basis from day one, and we continue to believe that. All the data supports that," Brown said last month.

State Rep. Mike Benson said the Zip Rail project has been discussed within the Minnesota House, but will likely remain just a long-range plan as long as the Republicans control at least one branch of the Legislature or the governor's house.

"We want to get to the bottom of whether this is something Minnesotans can afford," Benson said. That seems less likely considering the state needs to raise \$10 billion just to fund upgrades to existing roads across the state. Additionally, the source of most highway funds — a fuel tax — is slowing down because of better fuel economy.

"Rarely do we have public transportation where the operating costs are not a significant cost to the taxpayer," said Benson, a member of the transportation finance committee.

High-speed rail began in Japan in 1964, with a track from Tokyo to Osaka. That track worked for the Japanese because at the time only 11 percent of Japanese used cars and almost none routinely traveled by air. But even from that train-friendly climate, high-speed rail has faced an uphill battle to become financially solvent as more and more Japanese bought cars.

"All these h-speed trains didn't get these people out of their cars," O'Toole said.

The building of high-speed trains in Europe has been met with similarly disastrous results, he said. In fact, rail systems in Greece and Spain have been a major part of those countries' financial decline in recent years, O'Toole said.

"Spain built a line it had to shut down because it carried an average of nine passengers a day," he said.

Still, with all these facts against them, advocates of high-speed rail continue to work to persuade lawmakers to spend billions, touting bogus environmental benefits (studies show trains will become less fuel efficient than cars and air travel within a few decades), he said.

The costs both in capital outlays and operations per user mile for high-speed rail are much higher than cars, buses or even air travel, he said.

"A Minneapolis to Rochester line would be the same as 8,000 round trips per day on Delta Airlines forever," O'Toole said.

In the end, O'Toole said he hoped those who attended Monday's meeting would be armed with the knowledge to educate lawmakers and civic leaders. In the past, he has helped the states of Florida, Wisconsin and Ohio avoid costly high-speed rail projects despite promises of federal dollars.

"This is one of the huge pocketbook issues for Minnesotans," Benson said. "Make yourself informed before you go into that voter booth."