



High speed's slow track

By [Paul Merrion](#)  August 17, 2013

Illinois' multibillion-dollar plan for high-speed passenger rail service is headed for a blind curve.

A \$1.5 billion project to allow top speeds of 110 miles per hour along portions of the route between Chicago and St. Louis has begun and should be completed by 2017. But creating true high-speed rail service at 220 mph would cost at least \$20 billion and perhaps twice that amount, according to people familiar with a soon-to-be-released [feasibility study](#) commissioned by the Illinois Department of Transportation.

Improvements underway in mostly rural areas will cut about 55 minutes off the five-and-a-half hours it takes to travel by train between Chicago and St. Louis. Amtrak's current top speed is 79 mph along two-thirds of the 284-mile route it shares with slow-moving freight trains. On-time performance is expected to rise, too.

Ridership on the route was up nearly 9 percent last year to [a record 597,519 passengers](#), excluding Amtrak's Texas Eagle train, which goes on to Los Angeles. That's [more than triple](#) the total carried in 2006.

The project—funded with \$1.2 billion in federal stimulus spending and \$258 million in state money—has created construction jobs and other economic spinoffs. New Wi-Fi-equipped [railcars are being built](#) near Rockford, and a unit of Peoria's Caterpillar Inc. is a [leading contender](#) to build locomotives that Illinois and four other states [plan to buy](#) collectively.

Creating 110-mph service between Chicago and Joliet ([view PDF](#)), where the current improvements stop, and other upgrades would cost roughly \$5 billion, according to preliminary IDOT estimates ([another PDF](#)). That also would pay for a second track from Chicago to St. Louis, shaving another 40 minutes off the trip. Perhaps more important, it would allow twice as many daily round trips, attracting increased ridership with more convenient travel times.

A 220-mph train would make Champaign a one-hour commute from Chicago and reach St. Louis in two hours, at a cost in the tens of billions. By comparison, California's plan to connect Los Angeles and San Francisco with a brand-new, 220-mph railroad would cost more than \$65 billion ([view PDF](#)).

“That's the next big frontier in dealing with delay and congestion,” says Joseph Shacter, IDOT's director of public and intermodal transportation. “We all know that (220-mph service) is not going to be cheap. That's the reason we're pushing to get 110-mph service going. It's an incremental approach—seeing the public's response to that before taking the next step to a higher level of service.”

But federal funding for new high-speed rail projects has dried up as existing mass transit and highway systems struggle to find money for maintenance and repair, let alone construction.

“It is going to be difficult, at least in the near future, to get much more federal funding for high-speed rail,” says U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski, D-Chicago, the state's senior member on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. “I support high-speed rail, but we have to seriously look at where else” transportation funding is essential.

'KEY ISSUE IS FUNDING'

The GOP-controlled House opposes any high-speed rail funding, and the Senate is calling for a token \$100 million next year, one of many disputes that have killed progress on any transportation funding legislation this year. Congress hasn't set aside any high-speed rail money since 2010.

“The key issue is funding,” IDOT's Mr. Shacter says. “If funding were available (to complete 110-mph service), we could get it done in two or three (more) years. But it's very difficult to plan when capital dollars are so sporadic rather than some level stream.”

For Richard Harnish, executive director of the Midwest High Speed Rail Association, a Chicago-based advocacy group, it's largely a matter of political will. When immigration reform ran into concerns about border security in Congress, “suddenly they're talking about spending \$38 billion” on a high-tech fence along the Mexican border, he notes.

Spending \$5 billion or so would bring the Chicago- St. Louis trip to just under four hours, making it competitive with air travel after factoring in the time it takes to get to and from the airport and to go through security. But critics question whether that's even a desirable goal.

“It would be far more cost- effective to speed up security,” says Randal O'Toole, senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based free market think tank. “For \$5 billion you could speed up security at all airports, not just Chicago.” He argues that generating more travel creates economic benefits, not shifting people from cars and planes.

More than a decade ago, when dreams of a Midwest high-speed rail initiative began, there was barely enough money to do the [environmental impact statement](#) required for federal funding. It sat on a shelf until the stimulus program came along in 2009, looking for shovel-ready projects.

“The lesson is, you better have your EIS ready in case the federal government comes up with \$8 billion,” Mr. O'Toole says.