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## High-speed rail: In Obama's dreams literally and figuratively

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Every president ascends to the throne of power with a grand vision. For Barack Obama, that vision was endless stretches of pristine heartland interrupted only by the occasional silent blur of a high-speed locomotive whisking passengers from downtown to distant downtown in nothing flat.

The idea does have its appeal on many fronts. A system of high-speed trains eliminates the time needed to get to and from the airport. Another benefit has environmentalists practically salivating—the notion of clean electricity replacing fossil fuels as an energy source.

So why isn't everyone in Congress on board with the idea? *Boston Globe* op-ed writer [Derrick Jackson grumbles that the problem is Republicans, who "want to derail everything."](#) Perhaps. Or perhaps opponents of the plan are facing economic and practical realities that the administration and Jackson himself would rather not acknowledge.

Jackson ironically cites one of those grim realities when he quotes Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH), who asks: "Why should we subsidize an industry that will directly compete with the automobile industry, which is so critical to our area?" Granted Jordan's reaction is somewhat provincial, but it's also a lesser factor in an overall cost-benefit analysis of a national high-speed rail initiative.

The biggest stumbling block plain and simple is cost. [Randall O'Toole of the Cato Institute](#) places the price of a true, national high-speed rail network at more than half a trillion dollars. That's *ten times* the \$53 billion the president is asking Congress to fork over to help make his dream a reality. In any case, it's a staggering amount to contemplate at a time when the country is teetering on the economic brink.

Supporters of the initiative counter, "But what about all the infrastructure jobs it will create?" But it was precisely the promise of make-work jobs rebuilding the nation's highways that prompted Congress to sign off on the president's near-trillion dollar stimulus program in the early days of his presidency, and look how well that's worked out.

Still another argument that has gained some traction is that we should strive for compromise. Instead of building rail lines that will carry trains at speeds of 200 miles an hour or more, the nation could "invest" in moderate-speed lines, which would enable trains to reach optimum speeds of 110 miles per hour. Cato's O'Toole projects that

moderate-speed rail would run about \$2.4 million per mile, a pittance compared with the \$82 million-per-mile cost of switching to high-speed rail.

So what could be bad? Well, there are several drawbacks actually. One is that moderate-speed trains are diesel-powered, meaning they use and consume oil and emit the same toxic and greenhouse gases that cars and planes do. Another setback is that realistically these trains could not achieve average speeds greater than 70 to 75 miles per hour—not quite fast enough to compete with air or road travel. Finally, there is the matter of property rights, which is a far larger issue in the U.S. than it is in Asia or Europe—cultures that already have high-speed trains. Finding land on which to lay dedicated track in this day and age would result in enormous headaches and decades of costly litigation for the feds, not to mention for the taxpayers who pay their salary.

Maybe the president's attention needs to be redirected to another more pressing high-speed phenomenon—the nation's rapidly growing debt—which is threatening to jump the track any time now.