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Obama's High-Speed Spending on Slow-Speed Rail

Posted By [Mike Brownfield](#) On May 12, 2011 @ 4:42 pm In [Enterprise and Free Markets](#) | [1 Comment](#)

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Want a fast way to blow some taxpayer dollars? Buy a ticket on President Barack Obama's high-speed spending trains.

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High-speed rail is one of the president's pie-in-the-sky green energy dreams, which would do little to relieve Americans who are suffering the effects of high gasoline prices.

The president reaffirmed his commitment to high-speed rail in grand fashion this week with the [announcement](#) ^[1] of \$2.02 billion in funding for 22 projects in 15 states. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said the cash will "[bring] President Obama's vision of American high-speed rail one step closer to reality." The president really has to be dreaming, though, if he thinks this money will actually go toward "high-speed rail."

In reality, no high-speed trains—those that travel at 150 mph or more—will be constructed. The money is going to [subsidize freight railroads and slow-speed Amtrak trains](#) ^[2]. (In Ohio, Amtrak [averages 39 mph](#) ^[2], slower than Ford's Model T.)

Some dreams are better left unrealized, anyhow. Heritage's Ronald Utt [details some serious problems](#) ^[3] with high-speed rail, including high cost, the need for perpetual government subsidies, and wasted money from lack of ridership. Add that to [false claims](#) ^[4] that the projects create jobs and empty promises that the trains will help the environment by getting cars off the road, and America has plenty of reasons not to get on board.

California provides a perfect example. Greg Pollowitz at National Review Online [writes](#) ^[5] that the day after the federal government granted the Golden State \$300 million for high-speed rail, the independent agency overseeing the state's high-speed infrastructure spending shot down the project, calling for it to be put on hold due to [questions over funding and project management](#) ^[6]. The rail plan has been estimated to cost \$43 billion—and to date, the state has only \$6.3 billion in place (\$3.5 billion of that is federal dollars). [The Orange County Register report](#) ^[7] says that those costs are going even higher, and an [independent estimate](#) ^[3] pegs it at \$81.4 billion.

But this isn't news. California's high-speed rail project has met with criticism before. In December, the Los Angeles Times [reported](#) ^[8] that just one segment of the track, costing \$4.15 billion, would essentially be a "[train to nowhere](#) ^[8]."

The Midwest has a story of its own: the Detroit-to-Chicago Amtrak line upgrade. The lowlights include \$200 million in federal funding, dubious claims about how fast the train will go, and an incredibly low ridership. The Cato Institute's Randal O'Toole [writes in The Detroit News' Michigan View](#) ^[9]:

When Transportation Secretary LaHood announced this week that he was awarding Michigan nearly \$200 million for high-speed rail, he [claimed that the project](#) ^[10] would bring "trains up to speeds of 110 mph on a 235-mile section of the Chicago to Detroit corridor, reducing trip times by 30 minutes." But Michigan's own [grant application](#) ^[11] says it will increase average speeds from only 60 to 64 mph with the top speed remaining unchanged at 79 mph. That is, travelers will save a mere 12 minutes. And it's still faster to drive.

On top of that, the system would never be sustainable without federal spending. And the \$200 million the taxpayers are shelling out is just a down payment. [O'Toole writes:](#) ^[12]

Michigan's 2009 Chicago-Detroit rail plan [projected costs](#) ^[11] of more than \$1.3 billion, of which the state has less than \$400 million so far. So bringing the tracks up to 110-mph standards will cost at least \$900 million more.

The high cost of the projects comes as America faces a \$14.3 trillion debt, and states face a [\\$1.26](#)

[trillion budget shortfall](#) ^[13]. Americans are being asked to subsidize programs that benefit very few people. How is that a top national priority?

The Obama Administration maintains that infrastructure spending creates jobs and is a great stimulus, but [Associated Press and Congressional Research Service reports](#) ^[14] show that it does not. In fact, it can even have a negative effect. As for the environmental argument—that high-speed trains will get people off the streets and into mass transit—the reality is much different. [Heritage's Kate Nix writes:](#) ^[15]

Despite its cost, high-speed rail will be ineffective at achieving its goals, if Europe's experiences are any indicator. High-speed rail is expected to reduce auto and air travel, but in Europe, the trend is actually the opposite: Despite huge government subsidies, travelers are opting more and more to take non-subsidized and less expensive forms of travel.

High-cost projects that don't reap any rewards? The better choice would be to let this train pass by.

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- [15] Heritage's Kate Nix writes:: <http://blog.heritage.org/?p=51975>

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