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Citizens' Guide to High Speed Rail Construction Debate



Part 2: Fact checking the proponents' claims

When the public and the media have questions, the State Department of Transportation routinely refuses requests for answers.

These facts cannot be found on any official site promoting the so-called 'High Speed' rail line between Milwaukee and Madison.

Our analysis is based on DOT figures (including their federal grant application), analysis by Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute, independent media reports and our own number crunching.



CLAIM-This is 'High Speed' rail

FACT-While proponents like to use the European high speed rail lines as an example of the wonders of modern transportation, the Milwaukee to Madison rail line will have a maximum speed of 79mph. Eventually, after expensive alterations to the tracks are made, the speed is expected to top out at 110mph. To go any faster would require that a new, expensive track be laid and used exclusively by the passenger rail service. So, taking into account the quality of the track, the fact trains need to slow down before the stops and the fact that they cannot zoom through urban areas, the average speed of the 'high-speed' train by will be 57 miles per hour. By 2018 with a top speed of 110 mph, the average speed is still less than 60 mph. Taking into consideration the need for additional transportation once you reach the end of the line, driving will be, and riding the bus could be, much faster.

CLAIMS- Look at the ridership numbers. The project will help the environment by taking cars off the road. It's a way of reducing travel times and traffic congestion on our highways.

FACT-Even if the ridership projections are to be believed, less than 600 cars a day would be removed from I-94 between

Milwaukee and Madison. The state estimates around 350,000 riders would take the train each year. Let's conservatively break the 350,000 down to a little more or less than 1,000 riders a day. First, does anyone really believe that 1,000 people a day will use the rail line? Second, taking their cars 'off the road' would have no appreciable impact on the global climate or traffic congestion on I-94. Moreover, the estimated ridership concludes that three times as many passengers would take the more expensive and less flexible train as opposed to the already established Badger Bus service. Last year the average car on the road used 3445 BTUs per passenger mile. The average mass transit system used 3444 BTUs per mile. As cars become more energy efficient, cars will actually soon become more energy efficient than even high speed rail.



CLAIM-It will create opportunities for community development and public/private investments in areas near train stations.

FACT- Experience shows us otherwise. Look around the Amtrak stations in Milwaukee and Sturtevant. Go to the Sturtevant station. Where is the promised development? Travelers do not congregate near stations for long periods of time. Therefore, stations do not attract business. Living near the train tracks has never been an attractive option either and for that reason these stations have not attracted commercial nor residential development.

CLAIM -The implementation of the corridor service plan could potentially serve most of Wisconsin's populous and fastest-growing regions.

FACT- This near billion-dollar project is about connecting Milwaukee and Madison with passenger rail, if one begins to speak of the alleged benefits of a broader system, one would also have to factor the tens of billions of dollars in additional construction and maintenance costs as well.

CLAIM-Ridership will be high. In fact, students at Wisconsin's largest colleges and universities would be able to use this line to get to school.

FACT-The DOT has predicted that 32 percent of the high-speed train seats will be filled in the first full year of operation and would increase to 35 percent in the fifth year and 40 percent by the 10th year. We do not know of many college students who could afford the projected \$44 to \$66 fare for a daily round-trip commute. Currently, students who do not take cars to commute between Madison to Milwaukee rely upon the much less expensive Badger Bus (\$35), which runs extra service to meet demands during peak travel seasons, something the trains could not do. Isn't mass transit supposed to be for the masses? We think lower to middle income families and students will find the \$44 – \$66 fare too high to use this train. And if ridership projections come in lower than the state originally estimated, advocates will claim that the fare is too high and that taxpayers should increase their subsidy of the project to lower the price. Hang on to your wallets!

CLAIMS-The ongoing maintenance costs are minimal when compared to the entire transportation budget. Also, roads do not 'pay for themselves' either and receive taxpayer support just like this train line would.

FACT-The average subsidy for each passenger will be more than \$130 per trip, according to the Cato Institute. Subsidies for driving average less than a penny a mile. Subsidy for 'high speed' passenger rail will be near forty cents per passenger mile.

CLAIM-As gasoline prices increase, so would ridership.

FACT-Again, experience shows us otherwise. In 2008, for example, when the price of gasoline was at near record highs, ridership for the Cascade line in Washington actually declined.

CLAIM-This new, forward-thinking use of technology would transform the region economically and culturally.

FACT-First, this isn't ground breaking, new technology. Proponents like to point to European and Chinese bullet trains. Building such a train here would require the state lay an entirely new route of dedicated tracks and the purchase of even more expensive train sets and maintenance equipment. Second, there is no empirical evidence to support the transformative claim. The Sturtevant and Milwaukee Amtrak stops are exhibits one and two that train stations do not lead to economic development. Where

expensive stations have been built, vacant shops are in abundance.

CLAIM-This project is not being rushed, rather it has been in development for nearly 20 years.

FACT-Because of vocal opposition to the project, which was awarded stimulus money in 2009, state DOT officials are rushing to spend more than \$300 million in the final three months of 2010. Also, FEMA has remapped Wisconsin since the route was first suggested. That remapping, and other changes to the route, should necessitate a new environmental impact review, including a public hearing. Despite calls from Congressman Sensenbrenner and others for such a review, none is currently planned.

CLAIM-This project will create thousands of new jobs at a time when they are desperately needed.

FACT-Only 55 permanent jobs will be funded by this project. For the last 24 months politicians have promised us a better jobs climate through increased government spending. That has not happened.

CLAIM-Riding the train is economical. using the IRS allowed reimbursement for the cost of operating a car (50 cents/mile), it costs about \$40 to drive one way from Milwaukee to Madison.

FACT-The federal IRS reimbursement formula for business travel reimbursement is not the way to calculate the actual cost of travel. Rather than look at a chart, look to your wallet. A family of four driving from Milwaukee to Madison and back would spend less than \$40 on a tank of gas in the average car. Their cost to ride the train would be from between \$176-\$264. (Not to mention the added cost of a cab ride or bus fare to your final destination.) We know the politicians think Wisconsinites love them so much that they will take the train to the Capitol just to see them but in reality most travelers will be going elsewhere. They will need to take a cab to get to the Badger game or to get to the UW Campus, for example, so add those costs to the train ride as well.

Summary: Even if you take a giant leap of faith and accept the projected ridership numbers for this train the facts speak for themselves. It is not fast. It is not economical. it does not improve the global climate nor the local business climate. It does not promote development, nor transform the culture. But it *does* cost nearly a billion dollars upfront, with millions of dollars of annual maintenance and operational costs thereafter.


See [Part One](#) of our Citizens Guide to 'High Speed' Rail Construction Debate

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One Response to "Citizens' Guide to High Speed Rail Construction Debate"

1.  *Phil* says:
[October 29, 2010 at 12:13 PM](#)

"A family of four driving from Milwaukee to Madison and back would spend less than \$40 on a tank of gas in the average car. Their cost to ride the train would be from between \$176-\$264. (Not to mention the added cost of a cab ride or bus fare to your final destination.)"

So you imply that an average family of four only has to spend \$40 on gas on a round trip between Milwaukee and Madison by car? I guess that means they get their "average car" free of charge, don't have to pay for maintenance, don't have to pay for insurance, and don't have to pay for parking in Madison. Oh, and if they drive above the speed limit and get pulled over they won't have to pay for their traffic ticket either.

What a dumb comparison.

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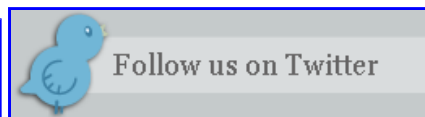
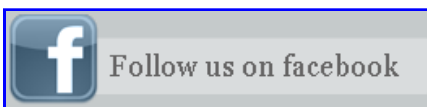
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[Wisconsin Voters Want Direct Say in Government](#)

The overwhelming majority of Wisconsinites want a direct say in government through statewide initiative and referendum rights, according to a recent poll. Citizens in Charge Foundation, a national voter rights group focused on the ballot initiative and referendum process and the John K. MacIver Institute for Public Policy, a free market think tank in Wisconsin, released the results of an opinion poll conducted in the state on voter support for initiative and referendum rights. The results were clear, with 63% of voters supporting and only 16% opposing.

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