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Jack Kelly

High-speed spending

Obama's rail dreams make no sense

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By [Jack Kelly](#), Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

We can "win the future" if, within 25 years, 80 percent of Americans have access to high-speed rail, President Barack Obama essentially said in his State of the Union address.

The president wants to spend \$53 billion over the next six years on high-speed rail. That's on top of \$10.5 billion already spent since Mr. Obama became president, but is a fraction of the \$500 billion Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood says would be required to reach 80 percent of Americans within 25 years.

The actual cost almost certainly would be higher. The project furthest along is California's, which in 2008 was projected to cost between \$33 and \$37 billion. The current estimate is \$65 billion.

I read somewhere that Denver International Airport covers more land than would be required to build a rail line from Alaska to Miami. If we weren't broke and deeply in debt, and we were building an intercity transportation network from scratch, high-speed rail -- at least east of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio -- might make sense.

But we are broke and deeply in debt, and we already have an extensive network of highways and airports.

"What's disheartening about the Obama administration's embrace of high-speed rail is that it ignores history, evidence and logic," argues economics writer Robert Samuelson at Real Clear Politics.

Amtrak ought to make money in the densely populated Northeast corridor, but it doesn't. For many routes outside the Northeast, it would be cheaper for Amtrak to buy airplane tickets for its passengers than to transport them, according to economist Bruce Bartlett at Capital Gains and Games.

Amtrak has received about \$50 billion in taxpayer subsidies since 1971. Still, it costs far more to travel on Amtrak than to fly, drive or take the bus.

Fares on Amtrak's Acela train average 75 cents per passenger mile, compared to about 15 cents for intercity driving and 13 cents for flying, Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute wrote at National Review Online.

"New York to Washington tickets on the Acela start at \$139," Mr. O'Toole noted. "JetBlue starts at \$39 and Megabus averages less than \$15."

High-speed rail, said Mr. Obama, "could allow you to go places in half the time it takes to travel by car."

We should take with a grain of salt such claims from the guy who told us Obamacare would cut health care costs.

The proposed bullet train from Tampa to Orlando supposedly would make the 80-mile trip in a little less than an hour. But if you must travel to the train station and from it to get to your ultimate destination, your trip could take more time than if you drove.

The proposed "high-speed" rail line from Madison to Milwaukee was projected to average 59 mph -- less than the speed at which most motorists drive on I-94. That's better than the proposed line in Ohio, which was projected to average just 39 mph.

The insoluble dilemma is if a train has a lot of stops, it can't average anything close to its top speed. But if it doesn't stop a lot, there won't be enough passengers.

Even with subsidies, ticket prices have to be high to recover capital costs. So even if 80 percent of Americans get access to high-speed rail, few are likely to use it.

Measured by passenger miles traveled, Amtrak accounted for just one-tenth of 1 percent of the national total last year. Even if ridership increased fifteenfold, the effects would be trivial, Mr. Samuelson points out.

"High-speed rail is not 'an investment in the future,' " he wrote. "It's mostly a waste of money."

High-speed rail is worse than a waste of money because of the havoc it "could wreak on our freight-rail system, with which many of the proposed routes share trackage," journalist Lou Dolinar wrote at National Review Online. A passenger train traveling at 110 mph would remove the capacity to run six freight trains, he said.

"Most track in the United States is rated for speeds no higher than 70 mph," noted Janie Cheaney online at World Community. "To support speeds of 110 or more, it would have to be upgraded, at huge expense and inconvenience for the trains already running on it.

"Once upgraded, passenger trains would be given the right of way over freight, disrupting further the most economically and environmentally friendly transit system in the world and forcing common carriers to bear expenses they would pass on to shippers.

"... And if current Amtrak ridership is any indication, those extra passenger trains -- whizzing by in a blur while valuable commodities sit on a siding -- would be mostly empty."

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