

US proposes expansion of high-speed railroads

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System, now ranked only 19th globally, would connect 'megaregions'

The vision of a high-speed rail system in the United States has mostly existed only on the drawing board.

But now, new US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg says he wants the nation to be a leader in bullet trains.

Speaking on Thursday at the Austin, Texas-based South by Southwest conference, held virtually, Buttigieg said he sees opportunities to build high-speed and other passenger rail service not only in coastal, Democratic areas in the Northeast and California, but in Republican states as well.

That could reduce dependence on cars, create jobs and help the environment, he said, while acknowledging it would need major federal investment and support from Congress.

The administration of US President Joe Biden is expected to roll out an infrastructure plan soon that would include funding for high-speed rail.

"I just don't know why people in other countries ought to have a better train service or more investment in high-speed train service than Americans do," Buttigieg told MSNBC in February.

Trains are generally considered high speed if they run at 250 kilometers per hour or faster.

"The US High Speed Rail Association and its members agree, and are ready, willing and able to help design, build and operate America's state-of-the-art national high-speed rail network," Andy Kunz, president of the Washington-based group, said in a recent statement.

By comparison, China's investment in high-speed rail is \$650 billion, while in the United States, it's \$3 billion, according to the association.

China opened its first high-speed railway in 2008, the Beijing-Tianjin Intercity Railway, with a speed of 350 km per hour. From 2016 to last year, total rail lines in China doubled to 37,900 km — the most in the world — and 95 percent of areas with populations over 1 million had access.

The country with the second most operational high-speed lines is Spain, at 4,100 km, according to the International Union of Railways, while the US was 19th at 301 km.

The American High-Speed Rail Act, introduced by four Democratic representatives, would provide \$41 billion over five years in Federal Railroad Administration grants for high-speed projects and offer incentives for \$38 billion in nonfederal funding. It would prioritize grants for regions not served by airlines. Supporters say it would better connect so-called "economic megaregions" and reduce congestion while creating at least 2.6 million jobs over five years.

Projects continue

High-speed rail projects in Texas, Florida and other states have proceeded despite the pandemic, while the California High-Speed Rail Authority project has been beset by what some call management missteps, delays and cost overruns.

Still, elsewhere in California, construction has continued on Brightline West's high-speed train between Southern California and Las Vegas.

Also, the mayors of San Jose and Fresno wrote in a March 5 op-ed in The Fresno Bee of their hopes for an eventual link. "A 'valley-to-valley' connection — bringing abundant Central Valley housing within a 53-minute ride of Silicon Valley jobs — enables greater prosperity in Fresno, forges widespread access to affordable housing from San Jose, and takes the equivalent of 400,000 cars off the road annually," wrote Mayor Sam Liccardo of San Jose and Jerry Dyer of Fresno.

Last year, one of the rail bill's sponsors, Sean Moulton, a Massachusetts Democrat, unveiled a \$205 billion national high-speed rail plan, much of which has made it into the current bill. He also said the economic benefits of traveling between, for example, Houston and Dallas in 90 minutes could be enormous.

"High-speed rail is faster, cleaner, safer and better for our economy. It will connect people to more jobs in new places, give Americans a choice in how they travel, and put us on par with the rest of the world," Moulton said in a March 12 statement. "We have the chance coming out of this pandemic to think big and think differently. Let's not waste the opportunity."

Not everyone agrees that high-speed rail is the way to go, because it is, after all, based on a 19th century transportation system: railroads.

"That's a solid contender for the prize for the worst use of government trillions — trillions, not just billions. True high-speed rail, averaging around 150 mph, requires dedicated track: you can't safely run trains at that speed if there's a freight train lolling around at 60 mph on the same track," conservative political analyst Michael Barone wrote in the Washington Examiner.

"California is supposedly spending \$100 billion to build what was sold to voters in 2008 as a \$33 billion high-speed rail line from Los Angeles to San Francisco. In real life, it looks likely to be completed only between Merced and Bakersfield."

Cato Institute analyst Randal O'Toole said that trying to be a world leader in high-speed rail is "like wanting to be the world leader in electric typewriters, rotary telephones or steam locomotives".

"If we are to emulate China's transportation system, we should look instead at its freeways. Including interstates and other freeways, the United States has 67,000 freeway miles (107,826 kilometers) and is building fewer than 800 new miles a year," O'Toole wrote. "China, whose land area is about the same as ours and which has about the same number of motor vehicles as the United States, had 150,000 km at the end of 2019 and is building 6000 to 8,000 new kilometers a year.

"China's road construction isn't slowing down because the roads pay for themselves out of tolls," he wrote. "China also realizes something that American political leaders have forgotten:

Highways drive economic growth because, unlike Amtrak or public transit, they are used by the vast majority of people."

The Associated Press contributed to this story.