

## High-speed rail: On track or derailed?

by Brian Johnson

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### Despite recent funding, Northern Lights Express faces uncertain future



This rail route over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis may be part of a future high-speed rail line to Duluth. The Northern Lights project got a \$5 million grant from the federal government this week. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

The proposed Northern Lights Express high-speed rail project got a boost this week from the federal government, but a lot more state and federal money will have to come down the tracks before the estimated \$800 million project becomes reality.

On Monday, the Minneapolis-to-Duluth line received a \$5 million grant from the Federal Rail Administration, and rail advocates hope for a \$4 million match from the state to complete preliminary engineering and environmental work.

Overall, the feds awarded \$2 billion in grants to 22 projects in 15 states.

Despite the recent grants, and the Obama administration's grand vision of \$53 billion worth of high-speed rail spending over the

next six years, the future of high-speed rail remains uncertain.

Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow with the Cato Institute and a vocal critic of high-speed rail spending, predicts the administration will not get its \$53 billion wish.

The money won't be there "unless we double the gas tax and use that money to build high-speed rail," said O'Toole, who works for the conservative Washington, D.C.-based think tank. "It's not going to happen. I don't see the political support for that, and I don't support it."

Others remain hopeful about the future of high-speed rail and say the Twin Cities-to-Duluth project would be good for the area's economy and the environment.

The project's website ([www.northernlightsexpress.org](http://www.northernlightsexpress.org)) claims the line would stimulate \$2 billion in development along the 155-mile line, play a role in the creation of 13,800 jobs and offer an "environmentally sound alternative" to car travel.

Bob Manzoline, acting director of the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance, a joint powers board that includes representatives from Minneapolis, Duluth and seven counties, said the \$5 million award is "very good news."

According to the Northern Lights Express website, the proposed line would offer two-hour service between Minneapolis and Duluth at speeds up to 110 miles per hour.

In the bigger picture, it would be part of a broader network of high-speed lines connecting the area with Milwaukee, Chicago, Cleveland and other cities.

But as some states start to cool on rail, those plans are becoming less certain.

The \$5 million award to the Northern Lights project came from a larger pot of money that was supposed to go to Florida. In February, Florida turned down \$2 billion in federal money for a proposed route from Tampa to Orlando.

A Feb. 16 New York Times article described Florida's decision to reject \$2 billion in federal money as "the most significant blow yet to the Obama administration's vision of a national high-speed rail network."

Wisconsin's governor also has said "no thanks" to \$810 million in high-speed rail money for a Madison-to-Milwaukee line, and Ohio passed on about \$400 million.

Wisconsin's decision is a setback to the big-picture scenario, but Dan Krom, director of the Minnesota Department of Transportation's passenger rail office, says it "won't prevent" Minnesota from moving forward with high-speed rail plans.

In fact, he says, a case could be made that the time is right for such projects.

"When you see \$4 and \$5 gas, it only enhances the need to look at other transportation options," he said.

The Northern Lights project would cost an estimated \$800 million or more for a proposed route from Minneapolis to Duluth. Possible routes through St. Paul are even pricier - nearly \$1.5 billion for one of the two alternatives. The numbers include a 30 percent contingency for unforeseen costs.

The St. Paul alignment is expected to cost more because a significant portion of that route now functions as a trail. Tracks, signals and road crossings would have to be re-established, and those are expensive tasks, Manzoline said.

Project boosters are counting on the federal government for 80 percent of the money.

But cost is not the only determining factor, Manzoline said.

"You have to look at other things," he said. "St. Paul is a large city and should be considered for that connection."

The Minneapolis line - known as Route 9 - would include potential stops at Foley Boulevard and in the towns of Cambridge, Hinckley, Superior, Wis., and Duluth.

The two proposed St. Paul lines - known as Route 11 or Route 11A - include stops in White Bear Lake, Forest Lake, North Branch, Rush City, Hinckley, Superior, Wis., and Duluth.

The next steps for the Northern Lights project are to settle on a preferred route and complete preliminary engineering. The goal is to complete preliminary engineering by the summer of 2012, Manzoline said.

Krom said the project team should have a better handle on costs once they complete the preliminary engineering. Part of that process includes taking a close look at the natural and built environment and seeing how that affects the project.

"The environmental process and engineering go hand in hand in developing this corridor," he said.

While some rail critics may prefer directing money to highway expansion, Krom says the federal rail money is a use-it-for-rail-or-lose-it proposition.

"People say, 'Don't build that, add another lane to [Interstate] 35,'" Krom said. "The money can't be used for that purpose. If it's not used in Minnesota, it goes to California or somewhere else."

#### **\$800B**

Estimated cost of Northern Lights Express high-speed rail project

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