

Obama to seek billions for network of speedy trains

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PHILADELPHIA -- President Obama will try to get Congress to spend \$53 billion during the next six years to create a national high-speed rail network, Vice President Joe Biden announced yesterday.

Calling the goal the largest investment in the country's rail network since the 1860s -- when President Abraham Lincoln began construction of a continental railroad -- Biden said the network would cut road and airway congestion, speed commerce and reduce the country's dependence on foreign oil.

"This is about competing; it's about leading the world," Biden said during an event at the city's 30th Street Station.

Biden, one of Amtrak's biggest supporters, took the train from Washington to Philadelphia for the event. He took more than 7,900 round trips on trains from his home in Delaware to the capital during decades in the Senate, he said, adding that shaving 10 minutes off each of those trips would add up to 55 days.

"Joe Biden and I are both rail fans, but I don't want other people to have to subsidize my hobby," said Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank.

"High-speed rail is slower than flying, less convenient than driving and five times more expensive than either one," O'Toole said.

Obama plans to include \$8 billion for the rail network in his budget proposal to be released Monday.

Pennsylvania's leg of the network would connect Pittsburgh to Philadelphia through Harrisburg. The Harrisburg-to-Philadelphia rail line, owned by Amtrak, already has had upgrades that increased top speeds to 110 mph. Passenger use increased by 57 percent, Biden said.

The rail line from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh is owned by Norfolk Southern, and passenger trains share the track with slower, more numerous freight trains, said the Department of Transportation.

Obama's goal is to give 80 percent of people "convenient access to high-speed rail in the next 25 years," Biden said.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood last year estimated that such a plan could cost at least \$500 billion.

Trains traveling as fast as 240 mph would allow people to get from New York to Washington, D.C., in 96 minutes, instead of more than 2 1/2 hours. As train speeds increase, travel times would reach a "tipping point" in which taking the train would be more convenient than driving, Biden said -- noting that outcome has occurred on the Harrisburg-to-Philadelphia line.

The six-year spending plan would be part of Obama's Surface Transportation Program proposal, an every-six-years spending bill that usually focuses on intra-city transportation. The proposal includes a "buy American" provision, which could create some near-term snags because no U.S. company builds high-speed trains, Biden said.

"We have to create whole new industries," he said.

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