

High-speed train system has a long way to go

By [Charisse Jones](#), USA TODAY

The Obama administration is proceeding at full speed with plans to create a national high-speed rail system, proposing billions in next year's budget to help lay the groundwork. But political opposition and hefty costs could mean the ambitious program goes nowhere fast.

President Obama's 2012 budget unveiled Monday includes \$8 billion for high-speed rail next year, part of a planned \$53 billion investment in enhanced train service over six years.

The money would further Obama's vision of providing high-speed train access to 80% of [Americans](#) in 25 years.

Vice President Biden trumpeted the initiative last week at a historic train station in [Philadelphia](#), and the administration previously allotted \$10.5 billion for rail projects from [California](#) to [Florida](#) that it says will create thousands of jobs, relieve congestion and improve the nation's ability to compete with countries where trains surging over 160 mph are the norm.

But the plans have met resistance from [Republican](#) lawmakers. GOP members of the House voted last week to eliminate \$1 billion in funding for high-speed rail in this year's budget. And in response to Obama's proposed budget for 2012 on Monday, Senate GOP leader [Mitch McConnell](#) said that "we don't have the money" to pay for "trains and windmills."

Lining up against high-speed rail

Opposition to the president's plan to give American business and leisure travelers a high-speed rail alternative to their cars and airplanes has been emerging out in the country, too.

The Transportation Department in December redirected \$1.195 billion intended for Wisconsin and Ohio to high-speed initiatives in 14 other states after their newly elected Republican governors rejected local rail projects.

Wisconsin's Gov. [Scott Walker](#) and Ohio's Gov. [John Kasich](#) cited concerns that taxpayers would be saddled paying for overruns and operating costs while getting little in return. They said rail funds would be better spent on improving roads and freight service. Florida's Republican Gov. Rick Scott has also questioned a rail project in his state that would connect Tampa to Orlando.

Even support for the nation's existing passenger rail service, [Amtrak](#), could be in jeopardy.

House Republicans have proposed cutting Amtrak's budget back to 2008 levels to save \$224 million, or 14%. And a Republican Study Committee has said that Amtrak should go by the wayside, and private operators should run trains instead.

That's as the number of passengers riding Amtrak trains has risen each of the last 15 months, culminating with more than 2.1 million riders climbing on board last month — its most successful January ever.

[Randal O'Toole](#), a senior fellow with the libertarian [Cato Institute](#) who has written extensively about transportation issues, says that high-speed rail's future is in doubt if Florida follows Ohio's and Wisconsin's lead. And he says that it would be a good idea to shelve a costly system that he believes ultimately will not save travelers time or money.

"Fundamentally, transportation technology improves when we come up with technologies that are faster, more convenient and less expensive than old technology," O'Toole says, "and high-speed rail is slower than flying, less convenient than driving and five times more expensive than either one."

Interstate system once faced opposition, too

The political jousting over high-speed rail is to be expected, some experts say, and is reminiscent of the creation of the Interstate highway system, which was given a green light by federal legislation in 1956 but not completed until the 1980s.

"We need perspective on how the U.S. works on transportation infrastructure and development," says Anthony Perl, a professor of urban studies and political science at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, [British Columbia](#).

He says he thinks many critics of high-speed rail could change their minds within the next decade if there is tangible proof of its benefits.

"All it takes is one part of the system to get it right," he says. "If we can get one effective passenger rail operation going on a scale that can't be ignored ... the momentum will pick up."

But continued sparring could dramatically slow down progress, says William Schroeer, policy and research director for Smart Growth America, a coalition of state organizations that are focused on improving neighborhoods and that support high-speed rail.

"Refusing high-speed rail is a little like refusing high-speed Internet," Schroeer says. "You're saying you don't want to be connected to people in a fast and convenient way. The questions are will we give up those benefits over the next 10 years and put off the day we can enjoy those fast convenient connections, or will we get it sooner?"

There is demand for it, he says, noting that in the not-so-distant past, many Americans could travel long distances without hopping in their cars.

"A lot of that was (because of) rail, and I think people want to get back to that without having to stand in airport security lines," Schroeer says.

But others worry that high-speed train travel may soon be stopped in its tracks.

"My instincts are it's not going to happen," says Fred Frailey, a columnist and writer for *Trains* magazine, who has covered that sector for more than 30 years.

"Start with the fact there's no money," he says. "All the pressure right now is to cut the budget, and the first place people look is the transportation side. No. 1, they haven't sold this idea. People are indifferent. You can run (to be) governor of Ohio or Wisconsin and one of your central aims is to give back close to a billion dollars in high-speed rail grants, and (you) win office. There was no political pain suffered by anybody."

Hurdles to face, but possibilities, too

Frailey says there's validity to some Republican criticism, such as a need to funnel more money into improving roads. Implementing a high-speed rail network will be extremely expensive, from the laying of track to the installation of signals.

He also expressed concern more money hasn't been dedicated to the busy Northeast corridor, which has a start on high-speed rail. Amtrak's higher-speed Acela trains, which travel from Washington to Boston, for instance, are capable of going 150 mph in parts of Rhode Island and [Massachusetts](#), but are prevented from going maximum speed elsewhere because of overhead wires that need to be replaced.

A lack of expertise will likely require the U.S. to seek assistance from partners in Europe and Asia to put high-speed trains in motion, Perl says.

"You could probably order everything from Segways to aircraft carriers and there's a set of people in the U.S. who know how to make it, and that just doesn't apply to trains," he says.

But while it may be a long haul, Perl says, he believes a high-speed system would be worth the effort.

"We're not going to win this race in the sense that the U.S. will lead the world," he says. "But I think we can catch up effectively and have something of great value to our transportation (system) and our economy."