



## Critics take on Quinn's \$102 million high-speed rail announcement

By Brady Cremeens  
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SPRINGFIELD – Gov. Quinn's weekend multimillion dollar high-speed rail announcement is met with skepticism from several field experts.

Last weekend the governor announced that \$102 million will be spent improving the high-speed rail line between Chicago and St. Louis over the next three years.

The money comes out of the \$550 million railroad-specific allotment from the \$31 billion *Illinois Jobs Now!* spending program Quinn signed into law in 2009.

"This investment is going to put people to work and take us one step closer to completing the high-speed rail connection between Chicago and St. Louis," Quinn said in a statement. "None of this work on the Chicago-St. Louis high-speed line would be possible without the outstanding cooperation of the Union-Pacific Railroad. Investing in our Chicago-St. Louis line today will pay dividends to Illinois residents for years to come."

The multimillion dollar investment will be used to build a second set of tracks between Mazonia and Elwood, and a new Kankakee River bridge necessary to meet the demands of increased capacity, the governor said.

According to the governor's office, passenger trains currently travel at 110 mph between Dwight and Pontiac. By the end of 2015, the trip between Chicago and St. Louis will be reduced to five hours from the current five and a half hours. When all of the improvements are finished in 2017, the trip will have been reduced even further to four and a half hours.

The governor's office states that the railway work will "create or support" 918 construction jobs over the next three years.

But some critics say high-speed rail isn't all it's cracked up to be, especially with such a large amount of taxpayer dollars at stake.

Randal O'Toole works on urban growth, public land and transportation issues as a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. He says high-speed rail projects are usually fools' errands.

“Beside the fact that the entire project will cost hundreds of millions of dollars, all it does is supposedly reduce the travel time a bit. Is this amount worth that?” O'Toole asked. “We already have an extremely efficient and cost-effective way of traveling from St. Louis to Chicago, it is called airplanes.”

O'Toole also pointed out the flaws of touting the environmental benefits of high-speed rail and attacking the environmental dangers of air travel.

“Usually on these projects, people like to say using railways are better for the environment than flying in planes,” O'Toole said. “That's true on its face today, but what's buried under that assertion is that right now planes are becoming more fuel efficient by about three percent a year while trains aren't increasing their energy efficiency at all. In a few years, planes will be better for the environment than trains anyway.”

Union Pacific Railroad, with oversight from the Illinois Department of Transportation, will perform the construction of the tracks.

“We value the public-private partnership between IDOT's Bureau of Railroads, the Federal Railroad Administration and Union Pacific Railroad in making the rail corridor between Chicago and St. Louis the premier high-speed passenger corridor in the country,” Union Pacific Railroad's Assistant Vice President for Public Affairs Wes Lujan said in a press release.

Andrew Nelms is the director of policy and communications for Americans for Prosperity, a group that advocates for less government, lower taxes, and fiscal responsibility. He says projects like this don't provide the benefits their proponents claim they do.

“At a time when the state's finances are in such dire straits and there are real, tangible infrastructure problems that need our attention, it sure seems unwise to spend this much money on high-speed rail,” Nelms said.

Illinois doesn't have the best track record of upholding its end of the bargain, Nelms said of the governor's claim that the rail work will drastically reduce travel time and provide an economic boost.

“Even if it goes exactly as planned and shortens the trip time significantly, that doesn't mean this is a good way to spend tax money,” Nelms argued. “A relatively small percentage of the population utilizes high-speed rail services on a consistent basis. If we're talking about using public money for public benefit – especially this incredible amount of public money – there are so many better things it could be used for.”

Emily Goff is a transportation policy analyst at The Heritage Foundation, and says high-speed rail systems are almost never a net benefit for taxpayers.

“In the whole world, only two high-speed railway routes are make a profit, and those are in France and Japan,” Goff said.

Goff agreed with Nelms that these kind of projects rarely realize the celebrated transportation marvels they are advertised as creating.

“The politicians who stand to gain popular clout by trumping up a grandiose vision of the entire country connected via high-speed rail are being deceptive and exaggerating,” she said. “The federal government has subsidized over \$11 billion since 2009 into high-speed railway systems with basically nothing to show for it.”

The additional \$102 million brings the state’s total investment for the Chicago-St. Louis high-speed rail route to nearly \$359 million, with another \$1.7 billion in federal funds planned for the project.

Work on the tracks is set to begin in 2016 and be completed in 2017.