



## Democrats Sound Desperate Note on Commuter Rail Spending

*Trump's infrastructure plans would leave little money for their beloved boondoggles.*

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As the Trump administration looks to make America great again with \$1 trillion in infrastructure investments, elected officials, lobbyists and industries are positioning for the largesse.

Congressional Democrats have been fretting that with President Trump's preference for revenue generating projects, many of their favorite projects will lose out on the pork to which they have become accustomed.

This could be a particular problem for high-speed and light-rail projects across the country. Far more cost effective transportation options already exist, Randal O'Toole, a longtime critic of publicly subsidized rail boondoggles, said. Trump, he said, understands this reality and will forego throwing money at such projects.

"It's a huge waste of money," O'Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said. "We have this new invention called the jet plane that can go twice as fast as any high speed rail car, and carries more people"

Realizing their fix, Democrats have been taking every opportunity to stomp for direct federal spending on infrastructure.

Senators Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Cory Booker (D-NJ), and Menendez (D-NJ) on Wednesday sent a [letter](#) to Secretary of Transportation Elaine Chao asking her to "to consider the urgent need for major investments in our nation's rail and transit infrastructure."

These lawmakers have been particularly concerned about the fate of the Gateway Program—introduced in 2011 by Menendez—that would add new rail track and tunnels under the Hudson River for about \$24 billion.

Given the project's exclusive focus on investing in the future of perennial loss leader, Amtrak, and commuter rail service, it is questionable whether funds would materialize under a Trump plan.

The senators sound a little desperate, pleading for Chao to visit the site of the project "prior to unveiling the Trump Administration's \$1 trillion infrastructure proposal," perhaps hoping she might come to some divine revelation on "the urgent need for federal investments in advancing the Gateway Project."

Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) is another desperate sounding pork hunter. Trump's "skinny budget" hacks out a \$1.2 billion grant for a long-planned light rail line in her state, to say nothing of the \$54 billion light rail expansion Seattle-area voters approved in 2016,

Cantwell hopes the project can claim as much as \$4 billion in federal grants for a project that will get just 3 percent of its \$54 billion cost from rider fares. Hardly a fit for an infrastructure proposal focused on projects supported by user fees.

Cantwell pressed Chao during her confirmation hearing in January on how willing the Trump Administration would be willing to spend direct federal dollars on rail in the Seattle area, which she says "desperately, desperately, desperately needs this infrastructure investment."

Chao was noncommittal.

Also looking for federal dollars for their high-speed dreams is Texas Central Partners.

Despite repeatedly promising state leaders their project would be entirely financed privately, the people behind the Texas Central project mobbed up with high powered DC lobbying firm K&L partners.

With deep links in the transit policy world, K&L lobbyists have been taking taking meetings with Chao, pitching the proposed high speed rail line between Dallas and Houston as "an ideal candidate" for the Trump infrastructure plan, the Hill reported.

Managers of this project have, up until Trump's announcement, insisted to the people of a state that flaunts its free-market success that ridership will eliminate the need for subsidy.

But according to a recent Reason Foundation study (The Foundation publishes this website) ridership for the Texas line will likely be about 5 times lower than Texas Central projections. Such a rail line could not survive without taxpayer money.

Most of this rail advocacy is political theater, O'Toole said. Democrats are just "playing to their audience, who like to spend big money without having to worry about paying it back." he said. He doubts the current administration will give them any of what they want.

Trump's infrastructure, O'Toole said, is more correctly set on projects that support cars and trucks. In other words, the way real people want to travel.

"Cars take them to where they want to go," he said, "not to a station that might be miles away from where they want to go."