



## High-speed rail is expensive and inefficient

by **Randal O'Toole**

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Would you pay \$1,000 so that someone — probably not you — could ride high-speed trains less than 60 miles a year?

Probably not. Yet that's what the Federal Railroad Administration high-speed rail plan is going to cost: at least \$90 billion — \$1,000 for every federal income taxpayer in the country.

Who will ride these rails? The pro-rail Center for Clean Air Policy predicts that the FRA's system would carry Americans 20.6 billion passenger miles a year in 2025. That sounds like a lot, but given predicted population growth, that turns out to be just 58 miles per person a year.

The average Illinoisan would take a round trip on high-speed rail once every 8.7 years. In actual practice, for every Illinois resident who rides high-speed rail once a month, more than 100 Illinoisans never would ride it.

Illinois' portion of the federal plan would cost more than \$1.2 billion. Adding proposed lines to Rock Island, Quincy and Carbondale would bring the total to \$3.6 billion, or \$280 for every Illinois resident, plus tens of millions more per year in operating subsidies.

That's only the beginning. We should count on significant cost overruns and tens of millions of dollars of operating losses, most of which must be covered by the states. With Illinois facing an \$11 billion deficit, it can't afford to take on new obligations.

Don't expect super-fast bullet trains for all this money. In Illinois and most of the rest of the country, the FRA merely is proposing to boost the top speeds of Amtrak trains from 79 miles per hour to 110 mph.

A top speed of 110 mph means average speeds of only 60-75 mph, which hardly are revolutionary. The Milwaukee Road, Burlington and other railroads were running trains that fast 70 years ago.

Rail advocates point out that downtown-to-downtown travel times on trains can compete with planes on short trips. But fewer than 8 percent of Americans work in downtowns. Those who do are bankers, lawyers and other high-paid people who hardly need your transportation subsidies.

Amtrak offers high-speed trains from Washington to New York today, but the fares are five times as much as it costs to ride a bus with leather seats and free WiFi. This suggests that many of the people riding such trains will be the wealthy and white-collar workers whose employers will pay the fare.

Moderate-speed trains whose average speeds are 60 to 75 mph are not going to relieve highway congestion. Even California predicts that its true high-speed trains will take only 3.8 percent of traffic off of parallel roads. Since traffic grows that much every two years, high-speed rail is an extremely costly and ineffective way of treating congestion.

High-speed trains in Europe and Japan may be attractive to tourists, but neither have stopped the growth in auto driving. Residents of Japan travel as much on domestic airlines and almost as much by bus as by high-speed rail, and they travel by car 10 times as many miles per year as by high-speed rail. "Not a single high-speed track built to date has had any perceptible impact on the road traffic carried by parallel motorways," says Ari Vatanen, a member of the European Parliament. The average residents of Japan and France ride high-speed rail less than 400 miles a year.

Nor is high-speed rail good for the environment. The Department of Energy says that, in intercity travel, automobiles are as energy-efficient as Amtrak, and that boosting Amtrak trains to higher speeds will make them less energy-efficient and more polluting than driving.

Steven Polzin of the University of South Florida's Center for Urban Transportation Research points out that autos and buses have relatively short life cycles, so they can readily adapt to the need to save energy or reduce pollution. Rail systems "may be far more difficult or expensive to upgrade to newer, more efficient technologies," Polzin adds.

If automakers meet Obama's fuel-efficiency standards, autos will be more than 30 percent more efficient in 2025 than they are today, so high-speed rail actually will be wasting energy.

People who want to save energy should encourage the state to relieve the

traffic congestion that wastes nearly 3 billion gallons of fuel each year. Traffic signal coordination and other low-cost techniques can do more to relieve congestion and save energy than high-speed rail, and at a far lower cost.

An expensive rail system used by a small portion of Illinoisans is not change we can believe in. Illinois should use its share of rail stimulus funds for safety improvements such as grade crossings, not for new trains that will obligate taxpayers to pay billions of dollars in additional subsidies.

Randal O'Toole is a senior fellow with the Cato Institute and author of "Taking Illinoisans for a Ride: The False Promises of High-Speed Rail," available at [www.illinoispolicyinstitute.org](http://www.illinoispolicyinstitute.org).

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