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High-speed wail: A bridge to the 19th century

By: Editorial Board

One possible alternative

Amid great fanfare, the Obama administration last week announced plans to spend \$13 billion in "seed money" for 13 high-speed rail projects around the country — \$8 billion in stimulus funding now with a promise to seek \$5 billion more over the next five years. Among the projects being funded is the St. Louis-to-Chicago route, which will receive \$1.1 billion. A relative pittance of \$31 million went to Missouri to upgrade service between St. Louis and Kansas City.

With apologies to futurists, people in the construction industry and rail buffs, investing \$13 billion (or even \$8 billion) in passenger railroads is a little like building a bridge to the 19th century. It's not enough money to make trains fast enough, attractive enough and affordable enough to attract sufficient passengers to operate without massive government subsidies.

This view puts us in company with the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation and others whose views we don't usually share. And perhaps we're being short-sighted: It could be that 50 years from now, America will be glad it invested in high-speed rail.

But right now, there are far better, fairer and faster ways to stimulate the economy than spending \$8 billion on the relatively affluent 1 percent of Americans who ride trains. Public transit immediately comes to mind. Missouri got \$31 million to upgrade St. Louis-to-Kansas City service that served 150,000 passengers last year. The state also subsidizes those twice-daily trains with \$5 million a year.

Meanwhile, the Metro transit service in St. Louis — which carried 353 times more passengers than the state's two Amtrak trains last year — gets zero in state tax subsidies, though the Legislature last year appropriated \$12 million in federal stimulus money to temporarily offset crippling transit cuts.

The \$1.1 billion that Illinois received for the Chicago-to-St. Louis trains is enough to pay for about a fourth of what it would take to upgrade the service to handle 90-mile-an-hour trains along its entire route. The 110-mile train might cut the scheduled 5-hour, 40-minute travel time between the two cities by less than an hour.

That's a long way from the 1-hour, 52-minute trip aboard 220-mph trains touted by the Midwest High Speed Rail Association. Just where the money will come from to finish the job is anyone's guess. Absent major budget reforms, the federal government will have trillion-dollar deficits for several more years. The state of Illinois itself is \$13 billion in the hole.

According to a study done in 2009 by Subsidyscope, a division of the Pew Charitable Trusts, Amtrak lost about \$32 per passenger in 2008, counting all of its costs, including overhead and depreciation. The Chicago-to-St. Louis trains lose \$16.32 for every passenger. Still that's better than the St. Louis-Kansas City trains, which lose \$50.16 per passenger. If you book in advance, you can ride this train for \$26, meaning you pay roughly a third of what it really costs Amtrak to haul you to Kansas City.

Train buffs will say, yes, but all forms of transportation are subsidized. True, but not 2-to-1. High-speed rail works in Europe and Japan, and even on America's Northeast Corridor, but only because distances are shorter and populations are denser.

"There's no reason why other countries can build high-speed rail lines and we can't," President Barack Obama told a crowd in Tampa, Fla., on Thursday.

"Can" is one thing. "Should" is quite another.

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