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High-Speed Rail Gets Another Look

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Without a great deal of fanfare, the Obama administration and Congress have laid the groundwork for a long-sought, high-speed rail network.

The president's stimulus bill contained \$8 billion for high-speed rail and Congress just added \$2.5 billion to that in the omnibus bill that wrapped up government funding for fiscal 2010.

It's still problematic whether that particular train will ever leave the station. There have been false starts on high-speed rail before.

But interested parties are taking no chances. So far 34 states have submitted \$57 billion in proposals to the U.S. Department of Transportation.

And in the surest sign that high-speed rail is being taken seriously, since June it has had its own trade group and lobby, the U.S. High-Speed Rail Association. Meanwhile, more than 50 public and private groups have directly lobbied on high-speed rail this year.

The administration defines "high speed" as 110 mph or more, a pace that's almost sedate compared to European and Asian trains that can reach 200 mph and average 150 mph between cities. What passes for high-speed in the U.S. is the 80 mph Washington, D.C.-Boston corridor.

The administration bills high-speed rail, at least initially, as a jobs and stimulus program and DOT says it has commitments from more than 30 domestic and foreign companies that the manufacturing for the program will be done in the U.S. by American workers.

A true high-speed rail network will require a broader vision and a lot more money. The government hasn't put a cost on a network, but the Cato Institute, which opposes the project, estimates that an 8,500-mile moderate- and high-speed network would cost over \$90 billion.

The administration and Congress' enthusiasm for high-speed rail may be prompted largely by the recession. Whether that interest survives a return to prosperity will likely be demonstrated by how much money they put in the pending six-year reauthorization of the surface-transportation act.

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