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[Will High-Speed Rail Finally Become Mainstream?](#)

In case you missed it, freelance writer [Jessica Pupovac](#) penned an interesting piece in this month's [Mindful Metropolis](#). In the article, Pupovac looks at how \$8 billion in federal stimulus money could finally bring high-speed rail to the Midwest. If successful, Americans might finally break their dependence on the automobile, and the money could help America catch up with other high-speed rail hubs like France and Japan (whose notorious



bullet train is pictured above).

According to the article, a high-speed line between Chicago and St. Louis could be running very soon since it could rely on existing [Amtrak](#) tracks. Pupovac also notes in her article:

Many in Illinois are hoping Illinois is a lead contender among the more than 34 states that submitted applications totaling more than \$57 billion. Illinois is asking for \$4 billion, or half of the total kitty, to build out a second, high-speed track from Chicago to St. Louis. The funds would purchase or upgrade the actual tracks, purchase new trains, install new signaling mechanisms and make a host of related improvements necessary to safely and efficiently run a train capable of traveling up to 110 miles an hour between the two cities.

But not everyone sees a future in high-speed rail. Pupovac also quotes [Randal O'Toole](#), a senior fellow with the Conservative think tank [Cato Institute](#). O'Toole, who wrote the study "Taking Illinoisans for a Ride: The False Promises of High-Speed Rail," argues that the hefty cost of high-speed rail far outweighs any environmental benefit.

"Who will ride these rails?," O'Toole asks in the summary of his report. "The most ardent supporters of high-speed rail predict that when the [FRA](#) (Federal Railroad Administration) plan is completely built, it will carry Americans 58 miles per person a year. By comparison, the average American travels by automobile more than 15,000 miles per year. The average Illinoisan will take a round trip on high-speed rail once every 8.7 years-and in actual practice, for every Illinois resident who rides high-speed rail once a month, more than 100 Illinoisans will never ride it."

Read the full report [here](#) (pdf).

I agree it's going to take a lot more than simply building the rail lines and technology to change people's car habits, but we're destined to rely on the automobile forever if we don't try. And not to mention look pitiful in comparison to train technology in China, South Korea, Japan and almost every country in Europe. It's time to look beyond the car.

Read Pupovac's full article [here](#).

— *Sheila Burt* / [Comments \(2\)](#)

roberto / [January 12, 2010 1:00 AM](#)

The Midwest was once the center of an extensive interurban electric rail network, parts of which survived into the 1950's.

The major hurdles facing a new network are similar to the problems faced by last century's predecessors. Getting from point a to point b was not an issue. What doomed these rail networks was sprawl and congestion that made their city-center terminals inefficient in lost travel time and lack of convenience to newly built outlying areas served only by automobiles.

At the same time cutbacks in rail service were supplemented by the growth of inter-city buses which offered more flexible routing to rural areas not served by rail lines. Some interurbans supplemented their rail service with buses, providing feeder service to and from areas not directly covered by rail. However then as in now, an automobile provided the maximum flexibility for those who could not or were not

served by either bus or train service.

Although dedicated right of ways and a renewed interest of city-center living would make a transit hub attractive, high speed rail is only as good as its convenience to a rider outside the immediate service area. Regular ridership will depend on reliable and timely connections be it by public transportation or park-and-ride lots.

Without flexibility and connections to outside ridership, point to point rail travel will suffer the same issues as their predecessors, and lose any advantage in travel time to the inconvenience of passengers getting to and from the station.

Chris / [January 12, 2010 9:40 AM](#)

Regular ridership will increase, as Roberto said if there are reliable and timely connections between urban areas. High speed rail will, as in Spain, flip the dependence on Cars and Planes over to a much more sustainable system. Currently, any travel over 500 miles is best accomplished by Airplane, and High speed rail will not and should not challenge that. Within 500 miles, the difference is clear, high speed rail (220mph) is the answer.

To ease connections and congestion in city centers, most proposals for integration, like that developed by the Midwest High Speed Rail Association, have required inter-modal hubs to be built with the new rail system. For example, in Chicago, the plan would rebuild Union Station to connect Metra and the CTA. This would allow for travelers to arrive in Downtown Chicago and easily catch a Metra train to their station and likely car out in the vast suburbia.

It will take the courage of our elected officials to create our "Great Leap Forward"...which would only put us on par with other developed nations when it comes to transportation infrastructure.

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