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High-speed rail slow coming to Nebraska

Written by Asher Ball, NewsNetNebraska

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Perhaps one of the most visible differences between the U.S. and other countries is public transportation, and that doesn't just mean what language a conductor uses to yell "all aboard."

In Europe, high-speed trains carry passengers around the continent to destinations at speeds up to 186 mph. Within the next couple of decades, Japan plans to introduce a magnetically-levitated train system that could reach even higher speeds.

But in America, only parts of the Northeast and **California** have established high-speed rail. In Nebraska, the two major population and cultural hubs, Lincoln and Omaha, aren't connected by high-speed rail.

And while the establishment of high-speed rail is building momentum in some parts of the country, it can't be laid everywhere.

In an uncommon meeting of science and public policy, environmental, technological, economic and societal factors prevent high-speed rail from becoming established between Lincoln and Omaha. "It's going to take some time before people really consider high-speed rail here," said Dusty Vaughan, legal counsel for the **Transportation and Telecommunications Committee** at the Nebraska Unicameral Legislature.

High-speed rail is a type of passenger railroad that can reach an average speed greater than 110 mph. Joe DiJohn, an urban planning professor at the **University of Illinois at Chicago**, said in a phone interview that passenger trains must be separated from freight trains and highway crossings to be considered high speed. For example, if a train shares a track with freight, an extremely expensive high-technology signal system would be needed to ensure trains don't collide.

Most of Nebraska runs on freight tracks, and DiJohn said building separate rights of way for high-speed trains would be expensive and difficult for the state. High-speed trains run on rails welded together called "continuous welded rail." The rail has no breaks in it, thereby cutting down on vibrations that decrease speed and increase noise in regular trains. DiJohn said he rides from his suburban home to Chicago on continuous welded rail. "You don't hear that clickity-clack," he said.

A 2009 MIT study found that high-speed rail uses as much as a third less energy per mile compared to traveling by car. In addition to acting as a safer transportation alternative than driving, if enough people use high-speed rail, it can also reduce traffic and airport congestion and exhaust emissions.

But some scientists are skeptical as to whether the environmental and traffic benefits are ample enough to warrant the cost required. These scientists argue that for a state such as Nebraska, the cost isn't worth it.

Randal O' Toole is a researcher at the Cato Institute, which is a non-profit, public-policy research foundation based in Washington, D.C. He wrote in an article first published in The Gainesville (Fla.) Sun, "High Speed Spending," that the U.S. won't be able to make trains with significantly higher speeds. Without increased speed, he argued, high-speed trains won't benefit citizens, the economy and the environment enough to merit their cost.

"What would you get for all this money?" O' Toole wrote. "Unless you live in California, don't expect super-fast bullet trains ... nor is high speed rail good for the environment."

O' Toole noted that a U.S. Department of Energy study found that increasing Amtrak speeds could actually increase pollution. High-speed trains run on either diesel or electrical energy. Both would likely rely on fossil fuels.

But DiJohn disagreed. He said just adding highways would undoubtedly be worse for the environment than high-speed rail. He also said one has only to look at European high-speed trains as a positive example of energy efficiency. They are competitive in the transportation marketplace and consistently beat less energy-efficient airlines for ridership.

"It's not strictly an economic decision," DiJohn said. "It has to do with public policy and environmental justice and mobility ... I don't believe

you could justify a public transit system strictly on a cost-revenue basis."

Other environmental issues could pose problems for Nebraska rail as well, though. New rails could disturb ecosystems and increase the risk for flooding.

Ellis Tompkins, railway division manager for the Nebraska Department of Roads, said a high-speed rail line would likely be less disturbing than a new highway. However, he said, those seeking to establish a new rail line must complete an environmental impact study to obtain clearance for construction. Highway builders must complete the same study.

Despite these issues, one group trying to bring the benefits of high-speed rail to Nebraska is ProRail Nebraska. Dan Lutz, vice president of the 100-member group, said high-speed rail is a must. "High-speed rail is going to be a monster in the future," Lutz said, "because adding additional lanes to the interstate is not going to solve the issue of traffic tie-ups."

But not all Nebraskans are on board with high-speed rail. Interstate 80 construction between Lincoln and Omaha is creating a six-lane interstate. Vaughan, the Unicameral attorney, said high-speed rail would be too much for the state to deal with right now. "We have a six-lane interstate," he said. "Our focus is on vehicular transportation, not mass public transportation."

However, Lutz said, adding more lanes to an interstate may not solve the problem of traffic congestion. He said high-speed rail isn't slowed by traffic or weather hazards, both of which increase travel time for vehicles.

But cost is another factor preventing the implementation of high-speed rail in Nebraska. Some of the capital costs associated with high-speed rail are train equipment, raiing, track improvements and track replacement.

In April, President Barack Obama set aside \$8 billion from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act to subsidize the building of high-speed rail. So far, California and the Midwest are front-runners for receiving federal cash for high-speed rail, but Nebraska will likely see little of that money. DiJohn said government subsidization for high-speed rail wasn't a policy until just recently. "Amtrak never received funding or approval for high-speed trains under the Bush administration," he said. "Only now under the Obama administration has that policy changed." DiJohn said the government has had to whittle down 54 million applications for stimulus grants. One plan supported by the governors of eight Midwest states is one that would make Chicago the central hub of a Midwest high-speed rail system.

That plan is the Midwest Regional Rail System, which calls for high-speed rail lines connecting Minneapolis, Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit, Cincinnati and Cleveland. But while these major metropolitan areas are connected in the proposed plan, the plan projects a rail allowing for a top speed of only 79 mph connecting Illinois to Omaha. The plan proposed only a feeder bus route connecting Omaha and Lincoln. A Nebraska Department of Roads study in 2004 found that without any federal funding, those wanting high-speed rail would have to look to local and state funders.

"There's just not any money available to do it," Tompkins said. "To build a new line from Lincoln and Omaha from an environmental and cost standpoint would be practically impossible."

The most logical option, he said, would be to build high-speed rail on existing tracks. That would be the Burlington Northern Santa Fe rail that runs between Lincoln and Omaha, but using those rails would lead to challenging right-of-way issues. "That rail already carries about 40 trains a day," Tompkins said. "Logistically it would be difficult."

And though billionaire Warren Buffet's company Berkshire Hathaway is in the process of buying BNSF, the company's regional director of public affairs, Steven Forsberg, said no changes to the company's rails are in the works.

"What we've told our customers is that we don't expect any changes to our services despite the change of ownership," he said.

The Nebraska Department of Roads' study also found that the populations of Omaha and Lincoln are still too small to generate enough ridership to make high-speed rail feasible.

"There's not enough people commuting between Lincoln and Omaha for it to happen now," Vaughan said. "It will take some years for the population to grow up, and maybe Lincoln and Omaha will grow a little closer together."

Vaughan did say being able to commute quickly between the two cities would be great, especially for him. "For the citizens, it would be awesome," he said. "I actually live in Omaha and commute to Lincoln every day. High-speed rail would be a great economic development tool, and it would hopefully attract more people to the area."

If a desire exists for building high-speed rail between Lincoln and Omaha, DiJohn said, residents and officials should work together. If the state can propose local and state plans for high-speed rail, Nebraska could get on track for federal assistance.

But while ProRail Nebraska isn't giving up on high-speed rail, Lutz admitted that the group has to pick its battles. Right now the group is advocating for better passenger rails between Omaha, Lincoln and Kansas City. Like other advocates for high-speed rail in Nebraska, ProRail Nebraska had to put the issue on hold.

"We're kind of stuck in neutral rather than low or high gear," Lutz said.

Asher Ball wrote this story for a science-writing class at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Ball, who graduated in December from the UNL College of Journalism and Mass Communications, can be reached at asherballa@yahoo.com.

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written by Bob C, February 10, 2010

Funny if it weren't so sad. At one time, the US was a leader in high speed rail. If you go down the escalator at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, there sits the Pioneer Zephyr, which debuted in 19-friggin-34 as one of the first 'streamliners.' It was capable of a top speed of 117mph. It spent most of its career running between Kansas City and Lincoln. And it went out of service fifty years ago.

In the seventy-six years since the Pioneer Zephyr made its first run, we've increased the top speed for American passenger rail by less than 30 percent. (Acela, 150mph.)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pioneer_Zephyr

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