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OPPOSING POINTS OF VIEW

Take a pass on trains: Committing to rail plans would cost too much

BY RANDAL O'TOOLE

Michigan should be grateful the federal government allocated *only* \$244 million to the Detroit-Chicago high-speed rail corridor. If Michigan had received much more, you can be certain of two things.

First, Michigan taxpayers would have to pay for those trains just about forever. Second, you and most other taxpayers would probably never ride them.

To qualify for the really big federal rail grants, California and Florida agreed to put up billions of dollars of their taxpayers' money -- money the states don't have and can't spare -- in matching funds for construction. California has a \$20-billion budget shortfall; Florida a \$3-billion shortfall. To pay for the trains, the states must either raise taxes or cut budgets for education, social services and other programs.

The states also agreed to cover the losses from operating high-speed trains, which will be substantial. Amtrak lost more than \$22 million operating its Michigan corridor trains in 2009, resulting in subsidies at least 15 times as much, per passenger mile, as subsidies to flying or driving.

Unless you already ride the trains supported by your taxes, you probably will never ride the high-speed trains.

For one thing, they really won't be very fast. Illinois expects to spend \$3 billion increasing the average speed of the Chicago-St. Louis trains from 53 to 73 m.p.h. Calling these "high-speed trains" is simply false advertising.

Second, even subsidized by taxes, the fares will be too high for most people. Fares on Amtrak's high-speed Acela from New York to Washington start at \$133. Megabus and other unsubsidized bus companies offer the same trip for around \$15. The buses have free WiFi; Amtrak has NoFi.

Many American visitors to France and Japan gush over those countries' high-speed trains. What they don't see is that, partly because of the high fares, the average residents of those countries ride them less than 400 miles a year.

Proponents argue the trains will be convenient for downtown-to-downtown trips. But less than 8% of Americans work in big-city downtowns -- mainly bankers, lawyers and government bureaucrats. Should it really be a state priority to subsidize wealthy travelers?

Nor will high-speed trains protect the environment. They won't be powered by some magically clean energy; proposed Midwest trains will still be hauled by pollution-spewing diesel locomotives.

Automobiles in intercity travel are as energy efficient as Amtrak. Cars are getting more energy efficient, while boosting Amtrak trains to higher speeds will make them less energy efficient. This is why the environmental impact statement for Florida's high-speed train found that the environmental costs of building it would be greater than the benefits.

High-speed rail is an obsolete technology that is good for neither the environment nor personal mobility. Michigan taxpayers should insist that their taxes be spent on vital government services, not pretty but useless trains.

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