



Obama's Expensive Train Set

by Donald Lambro ([more by this author](#))

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There's just one thing wrong with Barack Obama's \$8 billion economic stimulus plan to build high speed railroad lines he claims will create lots of jobs, move millions of people, curb traffic, clean the air and make intercity travel more cost-efficient and fast.

It won't.

It will create relatively few high paying jobs because the companies who build high speed trains are mostly in Europe and Asia. It will not be truly high speed like Japan's Bullet train, because U.S. roadbeds can't handle such speeds safely. It will have little or no effect on traffic because most of it is in urban areas not between them. Claims of less greenhouse gas emission are exaggerated. It will draw relatively few riders, because auto and bus travel is much cheaper and more convenient and air travel is faster.

Oh yeah, one more thing. Forget about Obama's \$8 billion price tag and the idea of being cost-efficient. These lines are monstrously expensive to build, costing an estimated \$1 trillion dollars after full completion, maintenance, operational and subsidy costs are factored in (something Obama never mentions).

The president's plan to establish a network of high speed trains around the country as part of his massive government spending jobs program is a public works boondoggle filled with grandiose promises that will saddle federal taxpayers with huge, unanticipated costs down the road, when fiscal forecasters expect trillion dollar budget deficits as far as the eye can see.

"Such systems are very expensive to build and also to operate, because they require new, dedicated rail lines built to specific tolerances and levels of durability," writes

Ronald D. Utt, a senior economic analyst at the Heritage Foundation, in a paper questioning the feasibility of the entire project.

“In pushing their high speed rail (HSR) agenda, the president, members of Congress and their supporters conjure up images of intercity passengers in spacious and comfortable rail cars traveling between cities at speeds approaching 200 miles per hour. Unfortunately for these HSR proponents, such a service is unlikely to ever be available in the U.S. because of the extraordinary costs and because government’s so-called HSR initiatives seem unlikely to provide much support for such projects,” Utt said.

Japan’s bullet trains and the French TGV run at speeds of about 185 mph, while the only high speed train in the U.S., Amtrak’s Acela, can reach speeds of 150 mph, though that’s only on a very short 35-mile portion of the Northeast Corridor’s rail line. It averages only 80 mph on the rest of its run, because of roadbed deficiencies and rail congestion from multiple users.

Utt cautions that the seemingly inexpensive costs touted by the Obama administration are wildly underestimated to make them seem reasonable to Congress and taxpayers. The cost of California’s HRS line, endorsed by state voters in 2008, was put at \$45 billion. However, an independent assessment said later that its real costs would be \$81 billion, and others have put forward much higher estimates.

“Sooner or later voters catch on to the misrepresentations HRS proponents use to advance their cause,” Utt points out. “In 2000, Florida voters approved a ballot initiative (absent cost estimates) to build an HSR, but in 2004 they reversed that vote once the excessive costs became apparent.”

But now Obama and the big spenders are back again with their costly dream of bullet trains running around the country, a pile of dubious claims to support their pie-in-the-sky ideas and a larger pile of cash to hand out to cash-strapped states like Florida and California who are all too willing to take the money, whether it’s well spent or not.

“The danger is that it will get fully funded and be built and we will have this huge white elephant and no way to pay for it,” Cato Institute analyst Randal O’Toole told HUMAN EVENTS. “Obama keeps pointing to the high speed trains in Japan and

France, he said, but he doesn't tell you how little the trains are used."

At best the high speed trains between Tokyo and Osaka and Paris to Lyon are said to break even financially, though analysts doubt such claims.

"The average residents in France ride the high speed trains less than 400 miles a year. The lesson you learn from looking at Japan and France is that they don't run lines that are moderately successful," O'Toole said.

Studies show that the average resident of Japan "rides low speed trains four times as many miles per year as the high speed trains because the high speed trains cost a lot more to build and much more to ride," he said.

And that's what is going to happen here if we decide to build Obama's boondoggle, he said. "Look up Amtrak fares on the Acela, Washington to New York, \$133 is the lowest fare. And then look at the lowest cost bus fares that are available, \$15.50 is the highest, one-tenth of Amtrak's fare.

What Obama is proposing is a high speed rail system that few will use "but everyone will pay for it," he said.

Making Obama's big spending railroad plan even more threatening to the nation's future fiscal solvency is that once some states get the money he is handing out, other states will want it, too.

So besides the plans for high speed rail lines from Tampa to Orlando, Fla., and Los Angeles to San Francisco, suddenly lines are already being added to the project on Capitol Hill, including a line between Minneapolis and Duluth that was not on Obama's list when he proposed it in 2009.

Why? Democratic Rep. James L. Oberstar of Minnesota, the powerful chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, is from Duluth. When the new high speed train map was published last week, it showed Duluth was one of the projects.

"Eventually the other states will want their own high speed lines and the costs are going to mount. Texas will want one, Illinois will want one. We've spent \$8 billion on this so far, but it's going to be close to a trillion dollars eventually. The annual

operating costs will be several times the \$8 billion,” O’Toole told me.

“Lyndon Johnson once said ‘I can never get Congress to drink a whole bottle of whiskey at once, but just a sip at a time and then we’ll fill it up,’” he said. “Obama is trying to do this a little at a time, so pretty soon you will see more lines added to the list,” he said. A line from Fargo to Missoula, Mont. is said to be on the lengthening wish list, among others.

Obama’s train set project is really two proposals: Two high speed lines in Florida and California, the only ones partly funded so far, and the others will be moderate speed lines of between 65 to 70 miles per hour. “That’s not going to get anybody out of their cars when they can take an airplane that will fly 400 miles an hour,” O’Toole said.

But in the end he thinks this big spending boondoggle “is dead in the water,” because future federal budget deficits will make new appropriations of this size virtually impossible. The states are under water financially, too, and will not be able to come up with their share of the financing.

California received \$2.3 billion for its voter-approved high speed line, but the state is facing a budget deficit of \$16 billion and will be expected to finance half of the project. Florida’s deficit is at \$3 billion, but is its Orlando to Tampa fast line worth spending \$1.2 billion in federal tax dollars for a trip that takes about 90 minutes by car? Many analysts think not.

“State’s have to be very, very careful, and realize that it might be hard for the feds to kick in the money for high-speed rail,” said Scott Pattison, executive director of the National Association of State Budget Officers.’

Earlier this month Obama went to Tampa to sell his costly railroad plan, telling voters that America is “falling behind” other countries in high speed rail. With a record \$1.6 trillion budget deficit facing us in this fiscal year and trillion dollar deficits for most of this decade, “it makes sense to fall behind in spending on high-speed rail that we don’t need with money we don’t have,” says railroad analyst Wendell Cox in a recent Wall Street Journal column.

Congress should repeal Obama’s high-speed spending plan as part of a government-wide initiative to dramatically shrink a grotesquely swollen budget that America’s over-taxed workers do not want and cannot afford.

Mr. Lambro is a nationally syndicated columnist and chief political correspondent for the *Washington Times*.

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