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The new pork: Trains to Nowhere

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In the last decade, the symbol for profligate federal spending was the infamous "Bridge to Nowhere" - a huge proposed span that would link the town of Ketchikan, Alaska, population 7,500, to an airport on Gravina Island. Powerful Alaska Republican lawmakers tried to stick American taxpayers with a huge chunk of the tab for this dubious project.

This decade, the symbol for federal pork-barrel excess may well be Trains to Nowhere - and if Democrats get their way, those boondoggles could span the country. At least in blue states.

Last month, voters in Wisconsin and Ohio elected Republican governors. Rather than just talking about spending less, both Ohio's John Kasich and Wisconsin's Scott Walker had pledged, if elected, to reject funds earmarked for high-speed rail projects in the 2009 **Obama** stimulus package. Kasich said he would say no to \$385 million for a train connecting Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati. Walker said he would reject \$810 million for a train from Madison to Milwaukee.

Both Kasich and Walker understood: Just because Washington is throwing around money that doesn't mean taxpayers get a free ride.

There is no guarantee that if you build high-speed rail, passengers will come. As Randal O'Toole of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute noted, "The Ohio and Wisconsin projects aren't even worthy of being called high-speed rail." The average speed for the Ohio's "3C" line is projected at 38.5 miles per hour; the speed for the Wisconsin line would average 59 mph. In short, these "high-speed" trains wouldn't even go faster than **cars**.

With round-trip Madison-Milwaukee fares projected to range from \$44 to \$66, it could be cheaper for one person to drive and certainly cheaper for two. And you can always take the bus.

Walker argued that Wisconsin, facing a \$2.5 billion budget deficit next year, doesn't need to be saddled with the \$7.5 million annual cost to operate the train.

Train enthusiasts argued that Walker had it all wrong. You don't say no to a free car just because you have to pay for gas and other operating costs.

But Wisconsin voters did not agree. The St. Norbert College Survey Center poll found that 55 percent of Wisconsin voters opposed taking the ostensibly free rail money.

After they were elected, Walker and Kasich asked the Obama administration to allow them to spend that \$1.2 billion rail money on other projects in their states. Walker wanted to fix his state's bridges and highways. Kasich asked that, if the U.S. Department of Transportation refused the

request, Ohio's \$385 million go to the U.S. Treasury to reduce the federal deficit.

Instead, on Dec. 9, before either governor-elect assumed office, U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood announced that his department would redirect the \$1.2 billion that would have gone to Wisconsin and Ohio to 14 other states. As the Weekly Standard's Stephen F. Hayes wrote, LaHood had sent the message, "if you don't want to waste our money, we'll find someone who will."

California alone stands to gain up to \$624 million of the forfeited stimulus funds - on top of the more than \$4.3 billion already earmarked for the planned high-speed rail project that would link San Francisco to Los Angeles/Anaheim and eventually reach Sacramento and San Diego. California voters passed a \$10 billion bond measure in 2008 to help fund the \$43 billion project.

In November, the California High-Speed Rail Authority approved the first segment of the project. It will start in the middle of nowhere (Borden) and go to nowhere (Corcoran). State Sen. Alan Lowenthal, chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, said he fears the segment could turn into an "orphan" line, unusable by bullet trains.

Noting that an Obama official had announced that California would get an extra \$715 billion in the San Joaquin Valley congressional district of Democrat Jim Costa, just before Costa narrowly won re-election, Sacramento Bee columnist Dan Walters quickly dubbed the segment the "train to nowhere."

In July, LaHood had proclaimed the Madison-Milwaukee project as unstoppable. "High-speed rail is coming to Wisconsin. There's no stopping it."

Walker wrote a letter to President Obama in which he protested, "It's outrageous for Secretary LaHood to suggest that your administration can force Wisconsin to continue building a train it doesn't want and cannot afford."

LaHood's Dec. 9 power play makes it official. It doesn't matter what voters want or whether they think their state can afford to take free federal money. As far as the Obama administration is concerned, federal transportation dollars are the Democrats' loose change.

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