



High-Speed Rail Losers

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Late last month, President Obama announced the recipients of an \$8 billion plan to develop high-speed rail throughout the country. In his State of the Union address, the president touted Tampa, the site of one of the plan's biggest grants: \$1.25 billion to begin construction of a high-speed line connecting Tampa and Orlando. "There are projects like that all across this country that will create jobs and help move our nation's goods, services, and information," he said.

[See [What Obama Could Bring to the Tea Party.](#)]

But there's a wrinkle in the president's announcement: Most of the \$8 billion is not going to high-speed rail. Amtrak's Acela Express, which covers the Northeast and is considered the only true high-speed passenger line in the United States, can reach speeds up to 150 mph. Of the more than 10 regions of the country receiving money under Obama's new plan, only California and Florida will receive funds to build new high-speed rail lines. Most of the remaining funds will be dedicated to upgrading existing rail lines. Many of these lines are not high-speed and travel at speeds of less than 100 mph.

[See [Breaking Down Obama's Budget.](#)]

The problem is that true high-speed rail is expensive. The administration is "being criticized because they're not putting all of the money in the superspeed trains," says Ross Capon, president of the National Association of Railroad Passengers. But making such expensive investments requires focus on just a few corridors—regions where there is a plan for rail service. "What we've seen from these [high-speed rail] investments across the world is that countries make one big investment," says Robert Puentes, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. "The advice was, pick one or two corridors and invest wisely." Instead, the administration is "spreading the peanut butter thinly all over the place," says Puentes.

Distributing the money widely might be part of the administration's strategy to keep as many constituencies happy as possible. "If the money only goes to a handful of places, you're effectively thumbing your nose at an awful lot of state departments of transportation, most of them already having trains running," says Capon.

Even with a larger number of rail lines getting funds, some places got left out. Certain parts of the country that the federal government had designated as possible high-speed rail corridors got little or no money. Other areas received far less than they were expecting or requested from the federal government.

The decision to give Florida funding for high-speed rail "raised some eyebrows," says Puentes. But the state government and local businesses had made plans for the new train in ways that other areas had not, such as acquiring land. "The point with Florida is that this is the one place where something approaching a European high-speed rail could be up in the next four to five years," says Puentes.

The following regions are those that were passed over for high-speed rail funds or got much less than they expected. Essentially, Obama sent a message to these parts of the country: If you want high-speed rail, you need to work harder for it.

1. **California.** The Golden State received the largest amount of money from Obama's plan: \$2.3 billion. The state wants to build a high-speed line more than 800 miles long between San Francisco and Southern California. But the money allocated is only a fraction of what is needed to make that dream a reality. After all, Florida got more than \$1 billion for a line that is only about 80 miles long. The plan is a "slap in the face" to California, says Randal O'Toole, senior fellow at the Cato Institute. He argues that while the California line is officially estimated to cost \$45 billion, "most rail projects have gone 40 percent over budget," so that number could be much higher.

2. **Rocky Mountains.** The large, expansive states in the Mountain Time Zone are pretty tough to

traverse with passenger rail. Colorado has submitted a proposal to change that: a high-speed line that would link Denver to New Mexico. But the project did not get any federal funding with Obama's announcement. "The one that stands out to me is the Intermountain West and the utter lack of any kind of awards there," says Puentes.

3. **Chicago-St. Louis.** Illinois was the third-biggest recipient of federal funds. State officials had ambitious plans to connect most of the state with high-speed rail. It currently takes 5½ hours to travel from Chicago to St. Louis by train, compared with about 4 hours and 40 minutes by car. The initial plans for rail development called for boosting the speed of this line to 220 mph—true high-speed rail—and reducing the travel time to less than two hours. Instead, \$1.1 billion is going toward developing 110-mph service between Alton, Ill., which is outside of St. Louis, and Dwight, Ill., which is 70 miles from Chicago. And on some portions of the track, "they're only going to be able to increase the speed of the trains from 53 to 58 mph," says O'Toole.

4. **Ohio.** A line connecting Cleveland and Cincinnati by way of Columbus received \$400 million, and plans are to eventually upgrade the trains there to 79 mph. But the allocation is far less than the \$1.53 billion Ohio requested to build a 110-mph line.

5. **Pacific Northwest.** Residents of Seattle and Portland are known for liberal politics and an eye toward environmental sustainability. So this region might seem like a perfect fit for high-speed rail. Last year, when the Obama administration first announced that it would fund select rail corridors, a Pacific Northwest Corridor connecting Eugene, Ore.; Portland; Seattle; Tacoma, Wash.; and Vancouver, British Columbia, was one of the proposed corridors. But the region did not receive any high-speed rail funding and got only about \$600 million to upgrade existing lines connecting Seattle to Portland and Portland to Eugene.

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