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## All this money pouring into infrastructure should be a boon for high-speed rail, right? Not so fast.

With many projects under way, the transit innovation's time could come. It just will be a bumpy road to get there.

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On the surface, the federal government's newfound commitment to infrastructure would seem like a boost for that grand elusive transit innovation of our time: high-speed rail.

After all, among the trillion-plus dollars that will pour out of the bill President Biden signed into law Monday, \$65 billion is earmarked for rail. Certainly *some* of that can help with the transportation white whale; certainly they could help the benighted Los Angeles-San Francisco high-speed line, or the stalled Texas bullet, or even the in-progress One Florida dream of a Miami-Orlando-Tampa route.

It won't.

"This package is not the silver bullet for the bullet," said Colleen Callahan, deputy director of UCLA's Luskin Center for Innovation. "We won't see much of it go to high-speed rail."

The new law contains no earmark for high-speed rail projects, the globally popular but American also-ran of public-transit advances that unites cities hundreds of miles apart without a hassle-y airport or carbon-spewing plane in sight. Instead, the money is expected to go largely to the federally owned Amtrak, which doesn't even own much of its tracks. It's conceivable Amtrak could gussy up its (slightly) brisker Northeast Acela route. But given how many problems on its traditional lines need addressing — and given that owning the tracks is what allows you to jet down them in the first place — no one is banking on it.

The move is a blow to those with plans to overhaul American mobility. But with a slew of projects underway around the country, that doesn't mean it won't ultimately happen — it just will be a very long battle.

The dream of high-speed rail reimagines not only how we move around America but the America we move around in — a vast cowboy country shrunk down to European size. A high-speed-rail U.S. is a place where people commute regularly from Houston to Dallas; New York office workers take a quick hop to their homes in suburban Philadelphia; Silicon Valley executives can jump on an afternoon train to a studio lot in Hollywood, and where Disney World vacationers can make a dinner jaunt to Ybor City, now just 30 minutes away.

“High-speed rail is a chance to write a new history for America,” Andy Kunz, leader of D.C. trade group the U.S. High Speed Rail Association, said in an interview Wednesday, his enthusiasm undulled by the lack of fresh dollars.

As innovations go, high-speed rail, or HSR, offers clear benefits. Electrified trains that can zip along at 200-250 m.p.h. with no worries of backups or bad roads — and none of the standard diesel engines — a potential climate-change dream and a consumer paradise.

High-speed rail also epitomizes this age of analytics, the cool-machine mindset that believes by studying all factors and controlling all variables, outcomes can be assured. A high-speed train that arrives even five minutes late on its 300-mile trip is considered a failure — a far cry from waiting an hour to exit the highway because an accident has, unalgorithmically, backed up traffic for miles.

And as the tech keeps getting better, so do the speeds. The Chinese have built 24,000 miles of high-speed electric routes in 13 years, including a 750-mile Beijing-Shanghai route that takes just four hours to run. The country now even has autonomous trains capable of hitting 200 m.p.h. Spain has tricked out its high-speed rail with the latest in automated signaling so that train cars can communicate with each other as often and easily as two retirees at a diner.

Japan, which built the first bullet trains in the 1960’s, is now experimenting with “MagLev” (magnetic levitation), a controversial but still intriguing tech in which trains top 350 mph with their wheels four inches in the air.

American efforts, on the other hand, can’t get off the ground.

In June a version of the infrastructure bill actually had an HSR clause — \$25 billion that could have jump-started a whole bunch of projects. But it didn’t survive the congressional back-and-forth.

HSR’s struggles in Washington are encapsulated by the announcement from the president, who boldly said that in just 25 years more than three-quarters of Americans would have access to bullet trains. Unfortunately, that president was Barack Obama, and he said it in 2011.

So what’s behind the stall-outs? On Capitol Hill, the automobile, airplane and oil lobbies have pushed hard against the bullet, since shifting people to rail directly drains their customer base. And there are social and economic factors beyond Congress.

While the U.S. was buttressing its highways and airlines for the last 75 years, “Europe and Asia never abandoned passenger rail,” Mark Smith, who runs the popular [“The Man In Seat Sixty-One”](#) blog, noted in an email. So when high-speed came along, “they didn’t have to survive as a stand-alone end-to-end route and did not have to attract all their business from a standing start. High-speed trains just replaced classic trains on the same routes with an existing clientele.”

Then there’s America’s greater decentralization — both in government oversight, creating a mess of approvals, and residential trends.

“The reason high-speed rail is such a delusion is that Americans just don’t live close enough to downtown cores — we’re too dispersed,” said Mitchell Moss, director of the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy & Management at New York University. “It’s getting to the station that’s the problem.”

Randall O’Toole, of the libertarian Cato Institute, has offered some of the most sharply worded arguments for abandoning HSR. It’s “like wanting to be the world leader in electric typewriters, rotary telephones, or steam locomotives,” he [wrote in April](#). He cites a lack of useful freight on the tracks and the relative cost-efficiency of airplanes, though supporters point out HSR co-exists alongside sophisticated air travel in China and Western Europe.

An increasing number of congresspeople are getting behind HSR. Seth Moulton (D-Mass.), one of its biggest advocates on Capitol Hill (he worked on the Texas project before he ran for office), this summer rallied 71 House members to [sign a letter](#) calling for more funding.

But all of these members are Democrats; perhaps because of its greentech implications, high-speed rail is often partisan.

Some voter interest might be waning too, especially after the California project’s very public derailments. It’s hard to imagine a worse HSR poster child: Approved by voters in 2008 at a cost of \$33 billion, the LA-SF bullet had lofty hopes. Part of the route was scheduled to open last year. But thanks to major missteps and overruns, it could now cost triple that and likely won’t launch until the 2030’s. There has even been [talk](#) in the state Assembly that the route shouldn’t be high speed, which is like opening an In-N-Out and announcing you’ll only serve salad.

Still, there are reasons to believe HSR momentum is building. Supporters say the underlying logic of high-speed rail is not only sound but getting sounder in the age of climate activism.

“High-speed rail promotes sustainable development with walkable downtown and urban communities that young people all over want,” Moulton said in an interview. “Single-occupancy vehicles promote the opposite.”

Asked about an American romance with the automobile that might hold it back, Moulton answered ... directly. “That’s bulls---,” he said. “We never say ‘we love our cars so we won’t get in an aluminum tube 30,000 feet in the air.’”

He noted consumer interest is strong enough even private financiers want in — “not something you see with highways,” he said dryly.

The billionaire investor Wes Edens has been among those prioritizing HSR, via his company Brightline. The rare private-train firm, which runs a traditional line from Miami to West Palm Beach, is set to open a faster (120 m.p.h.) route from West Palm to Orlando next year and is seeking permissions and land leases 90 miles west to Tampa. The company also has Brightline West; it seeks to connect Las Vegas to the commuter lines of Rancho Cucamonga 50 miles east of Los Angeles by high-speed-rail, a Bally’s-Beverly Hills union of capitalist convenience.

“New kinds of projects always have naysayers until you hit the inflection point of opening,” Brightline chief executive Michael Reininger told The Post Wednesday. “The fastest ways to change perception is to get people the experience.”

The company has faced delays in Vegas but recently bought land for a station near the Strip and is readying for a bond issuance, Reininger says; the aim is to break ground next year for a 2026 opening. If it happens, a four-hour trip by car will ultimately drop to under three hours by train.

Travel times on the other projects aren’t beam-me-up-Scotty fast either, but they’re quick. The stalled Texas Central would take the Houston-Dallas journey from 3.5 hours to 90 minutes. Even if LA-SF can’t sink to the promised 2’ 40”, it’s a lot better than six hours on a never-ending I-5.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, with a mayoral history of transit innovation, has been vocal on HSR: “I just don’t know why people in other countries ought to have better train service and more investment in high-speed train service than Americans,” he said earlier this year.

Last month President Biden told a crowd at a Scranton trolley museum that HSR “will take literally millions of automobiles off the road, saving tens of millions of barrels of oil ... This is not hyperbole. This is a fact.” There’s a \$10 billion clause for HSR in the current House version of the Build Back Better Act; if the clause makes it through and the bill passes, it would provide a huge boost to many projects.

But the biggest driving force may come from consumers. If just one of the active bullet projects opens and catches on, it could bring a flood of investment and imitators.

“Nothing succeeds,” Smith said, “like success.”