

High-Speed Rail: Great for Europe, but Less So for the U.S.?

As climate change negotiations in Copenhagen stumble and threaten to dissolve, at least one aspect of “green” living looks set to rev up: high-speed rail. But even as enthusiasm for it spreads from Antwerp to Tallahassee, critics warn that it may not be all it’s cracked up to be.

If you look at what’s going on in Europe this week, it seems pretty obvious that high-speed rail is the new, new thing. On Monday, four different countries ushered in modifications to their high-speed services, slashing travel times between intercontinental routes like Paris and Amsterdam and Brussels and Cologne. In the U.K., Gordon Brown hailed the start of the country’s first full domestic high-speed rail service, promising to invest £20 billion in railway infrastructure over the next few years and connecting cities like London and Glasgow. If plans for a rail tunnel under the Strait of Gibraltar from Spain to Morocco are finalized, trains could link Europe and Africa by 2025.

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It’s hard not to embrace the idea of high speed rail. For starters, it unites all the old-fashioned intimacy and charm of a rail journey with the sleek, elegant efficiency of modern technology. It’s not at all unusual for Londoners to hop on the Eurostar and head to Paris (a 2-hour-15-minute journey) just for the day. If you ever happen to wind up in first class and take that first sip of (complimentary) Merlot, as I once did, you’ll wonder if life gets much better than this.

High-speed rail can also be a boon to economic growth. Spain’s much-touted system has revitalized industrial development in heretofore far-flung and less prosperous cities, turning the entire country into a mega-region.

And, of course, there’s the environment. A study commissioned by Eurostar found that travelling by train from London to



Shaun Curry, AFP/Getty Images

Paris generates just one-tenth the amount of carbon dioxide as a plane journey.

And it’s not just in Europe where this idea is taking off. Earlier this year, the Obama administration laid out a strategic plan for high-speed rail in the U.S. Eight million dollars of Economic Recovery Act spending were targeted toward this purpose, which was later supplemented by an additional \$4 billion from Congress. The initiative has enjoyed wide-ranging bipartisan support. Plans are already well underway for a state-wide high-speed system in California. And just last week, Florida lawmakers approved a three-phase plan for their state.

But although “what’s not to like?” seems easy enough to answer, some are questioning whether high-speed rail is really as good as it sounds, at least for America. For starters, there’s the question of scale. As one analyst at the Reason Foundation pointed out, the U.S. is not Spain. Even if we could double intercity passenger rail patronage within the first year, this would barely equal 2 percent of commercial air-traffic volume — even if all new rail riders

were former air travelers.

More to the point, what the president is proposing for most of the country is — as one commenter quipped — more like “moderate-speed rail.” What the administration has in mind would accommodate train speeds of 110 miles per hour, not the 150 mph or more commonly used in Europe and Asia.

But there are other potential problems as well. Some of America’s top economists have wondered out loud whether or not the cost of building a such a system from scratch is truly worth it. Harvard University’s Edward Glaeser estimates that the up-front construction and operating costs would be on the order of \$375 million per year (which includes an estimate for environmental benefits). Look here to see how he runs the numbers.

Glaeser — who specializes in urban economics — has also questioned the putative benefits that derive from reshaping America’s economy around so-called mega-regions. Consistent with the idea that America is not Spain, he points out that

connecting two cities — say, Buffalo and New York — by high-speed rail would still entail a 2½-hour journey, which is not significantly faster than flying. Nor is it clear — to him, at least — that “second cities” like Philadelphia, which already have fairly high-speed access to New York, have benefited in terms of population or employment.

Perhaps most devastating of all, Glaeser calculates that the environmental benefits of high-speed rail may not be all that great. Through a series of economic models, he finds that while the environmental and mortality benefits of rail are real, the magnitude of the social benefits is quite small relative to the cost.

This claim is seconded by Randal O’Toole of the Cato Institute, who takes it a step further. Everyone agrees that the construction of high-speed rail lines will consume enormous amounts of energy and emit enormous volumes of greenhouse gases. Given that future cars and planes will be more energy efficient, he argues there are likely to be no long-term environmental benefits from investment in high-speed rail.

Wow. Talk about a buzzkill. Sounds like we’ve got some more thinking to do — at least in America. As for me? Not so much. I’d love to give this some more thought but I’ve got a train to catch . . . to Bruges. Merlot anyone?

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