

## Fast-train campaign is picking up speed

Transportation » UTA joins an alliance studying a high-speed line for the region.

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Salt Lake City to Denver.

An hour-and-a-half flight usually turns into a three-hour affair of checking in, waiting on the runway and picking up luggage.

The airplane-wary can instead hop in a car for a six-hour drive or a Greyhound bus for a 10-hour ride.

Or you could hitchhike, but travel times and safety are iffy -- at best.

But there's a push to add another option: high-speed trains that whisk riders off at speeds upward of 150 mph and even nearing 300 mph to challenge the quickness of air travel. A train speeding at 180 mph might make that trip in slightly more than four hours.

While the Obama administration in the spring highlighted 10 high-speed rail corridors on the West Coast, East Coast and Midwest that could receive federal funding, Utah and its neighbors (the Plains states, too) were overlooked.

"You can't just do high-speed rail in pieces," said Tom Skancke, a Las Vegas transportation consultant who is helping organize the Western High-Speed Rail Alliance. "You have to look at it from a national systemic program ... you can't leave out nine Western states."

The Utah Transit Authority joined the alliance late this summer, along with governmental and transportation groups in Nevada, Arizona and Colorado. New Mexico is in discussions to join.

Members are paying a monthly \$5,000 fee. Skancke said the aim is to fund a preliminary study of the possibilities of high-speed rail in the region, as well as to have a role in national discussions on planning and funding the system.

"The West is going to be where the population is going to be in the next 20 to 30 years," Skancke said, "and we have to be prepared for that."

While this region doesn't have the density of California or New England or, perhaps because of that, federal attention, Utah is poised to balloon to 7 million residents by 2050, said UTA Assistant General Manager Mike Allegra.

"The cities of Denver, Phoenix [and] Salt Lake are becoming a much more prominent part of our national system," he said, "and ultimately a part of our economic base and international competitiveness."

While the coastal states might have a more immediate need for new transportation systems, sustainable development in the Intermountain West still has merit, said Peter Martin, the director of the University of Utah's traffic lab. Those high-speed trains, which have a lower environmental impact, could be an effective part, along with planes, buses and cars, of reducing the congestion between cities, he said -- congestion that surely will increase.

"So many of the things we do here," Martin added, "[are] trying to head off the problems that were manifest in places like Southern California, metropolitan Houston, the southern beltway."

Learning from Amtrak's struggles in the Northeast -- shared use by passenger and freight causes more wear on rails, plus renovations and upgrades can be more costly on tracks in the middle of a busy metropolis -- can help the West as it studies high-speed rail, said UTA's Allegra.

"I see some opportunities here that don't exist in other places," he said, adding that this region has more flexibility to study whether to follow existing railroad tracks or lay new ones in routes that could be quicker.

If the Western High-Speed Rail Alliance's preliminary and future studies identify possible corridors, the money might not be available to build high-speed rail. But, Allegra said, the states can begin the process of acquiring the right of way before it's developed.

"You know something's going to happen," he said of the growth in Utah during the past several decades. "We've learned some lessons here to say, 'Let's get ahead of these [changes].'"

Apart from studying the feasibility of high-speed rail and the options -- technologies vary among the trains in Europe and Asia -- there's also the cost.

To be successful, high-speed fares would have to be competitive with air travel, said Allegra, and some preliminary studies have shown that to be possible for middle-distance trips.

And those kinds of journeys probably would be the most popular, said traffic planner Martin. Travelers might favor airplanes between Salt Lake City and New York City, he said, but many Utahns going to San Francisco would prefer a train.

Cost has affected plans in the past. A California proposal recently thawed after being frozen since the 1980s because of difficulty finding financing.

In 2004, Florida voters repealed their 2000 mandate to link five urban areas with a top-speed, 150 mph train after the price tag was pegged at \$25 billion.

The federal stimulus bill carved \$8 billion for high-speed rail developments. Earlier this week, the Obama administration announced applications came in for high-speed projects from 24 states and totaled about \$50 billion. California, which is actively pursuing an eventual bullet train running from San Diego to Sacramento or San Francisco, asked for \$4.7 billion to partially fund the estimated \$45 billion project.

The libertarian Cato Institute has criticized the national push for high-speed rail. The group points to government subsidies given to the slower-speed Amtrak, as well as the relatively higher costs per passenger of high-speed rail when compared with highways.

But those jabs don't take into account that "all of our transportation systems are heavily subsidized," said UTA's Allegra.

Local governments pay for the airports where private companies maintain their fleets and access customers, he said. Though the public might have to assume much of the upfront cost of developing the rail system, operations would be covered by users, he said.

Martin said critics' strict focus on the bottom line is too superficial.

"Cost is more than dollars and cents. There's cost to the community. Cost to the environment," he said. "There's cost to the sustainability of our region."

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