

## Kristina Rasmussen: Fast-tracking high-speed plans is not sound policy

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Here's a line you won't hear very often around Springfield: "I'm an Amtrak rider, and I oppose the plans to bring high-speed rail to Illinois."

For me, the sentiment is heartfelt. As a local resident, I ride Amtrak up to Chicago on a regular basis. Even so, I'm convinced that current high-speed rail efforts are not on the right track.

Let's start with the obvious, and it is a problem facing anyone who wants to spend more taxpayer dollars: There isn't exactly a ton of extra money laying around in federal, state or local coffers. Government is broke.

According to transit expert Randal O'Toole, Illinois' portion of the Federal Railroad Administration high-speed rail plan will cost more than \$1.2 billion. Bump that up to \$3.6 billion — nearly \$280 for every Illinois resident — if you include proposed lines to Rock Island, Quincy and Carbondale.

Illinois isn't the only state vying for the \$8 billion of federal stimulus money earmarked for high-speed rail. We should be prepared to finance hefty rail costs ourselves. When operating and maintenance funds are added to capital costs, the \$28 million annual subsidy given to Amtrak in recent years by Illinois's state government will look puny. Are you ready to pay higher taxes for high-speed rail?

Keep in mind that Illinois isn't even slated to get "super" high-speed rail (which calls for trains running up to 220 miles per hour) under the Federal Railroad Administration blueprint. The plan calls for upgrading tracks to allow trains running up to 110 miles per hour.

Most Amtrak trains already go up to 79 miles per hour.

Rolling out "super" high-speed rail from Chicago to St. Louis would come with a price tag of \$11.5 billion. That's like doubling the amount of Illinois' budget deficit. Even Sen. Dick Durbin thinks that bringing super high-speed rail to Illinois is unrealistic for the time being.

We'll still notice the impact of "regular" high-speed rail on downtown homes and businesses. Up to 40 trains a day could rumble through town within seven years, including 18 Amtrak passenger trains. A local Realtor friend pointed out that the noise from these trains might affect nearby property values.

Now, I'm lucky to live and work on one side of the Third Street corridor train tracks, which is where high-speed rail looks likely to cut its path across the city. Folks who have to cross the tracks to get to work, school or play might not be thrilled with the closing of connector streets or the building of bulky overpasses to accommodate the trains.

"Haste makes waste" is a lesson we shouldn't forget. Yet there's plenty of haste going on, because the stimulus bill requires applications for rail funds to be submitted by October.

The Illinois Department of Transportation has said there isn't time to study alternative rail corridors because of the federal funding deadline. Instead of taking the time to figure out what is best for Springfield (Third Street versus Tenth Street versus out of town versus not at all), we're rushing to spend money on a plan that may need to be fundamentally re-done in the future. The potential for waste is too big to ignore.

Next, let's look at who will use the train. Generous projections average the ridership from the Federal Railroad Administration's high-speed rail plan at 58 miles per person in 2025. Compare that to the 15,000 passenger miles you and I each ride in a car each year.

O'Toole points out that "the average Illinoisan will take a round trip on high-speed rail once every 8.7 years. For every Illinoisan who rides high-speed rail once a month, more than 100 residents will never ride it."

Yes, a small number of Springfield residents might use high-speed rail to commute to jobs in St. Louis or Chicago. Are you prepared to subsidize their daily ride? What if they're predominantly high-paid professionals who work in downtown offices?

Along with all these troubles, it turns out there are serious problems with rail's energy claims. Cars and planes have a shorter lifespan than trains, allowing for faster turnover and the introduction of new energy-saving technology (this is ostensibly the point behind the Cash for Clunkers program). If America overcommits to rail while cars and planes become more efficient, we could actually end up wasting energy. Even now, the Department of Energy notes that average inter-city car travel is currently as energy efficient as trips taken on Amtrak.

The federal government is dangling stimulus dollars in front of Illinois (and almost every other state) for high-speed rail development. But that doesn't mean we have to bite, especially if it puts us on the hook for a busted budget, disrupted neighborhoods, inefficient energy consumption and fast politics trumping sound policy.

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