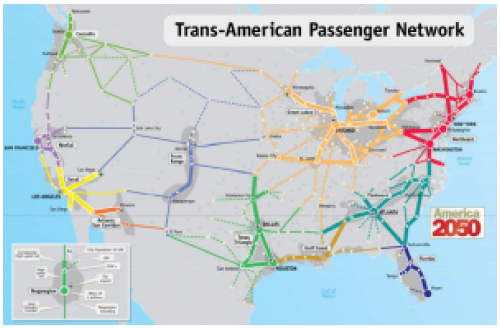
Daily Climate News and Analysis

High-Speed Rail Study Shows US Potential, but Where's the Funding?

by Max Ajl - Oct 5th, 2009



Anyone who's been to Europe and flashed across the countryside in a high-speed TGV knows that long-haul traveling need not involve either a plane ride with endless security lines and annoying pat-downs or an expensive, tiring drive.

Europe's bullet-trains, zipping along at over 150 mph, carry passengers far more efficiently over distances from 100 to 500 miles than other forms of transportation.

The Chinese recognize the value. Last week, Bombardier Transportation announced a $4 billion deal with the Chinese Ministry of Railways to supply 80 ZEFIRO 380 high-speed trains for China's growing network.

So what about the U.S.?

Well, the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act — more familiarly known as the stimulus bill — provides $8 billion for inter-city and high-speed rail projects. That's considerably more than high-speed rail received during the Bush years. But it's not nearly enough.

The Transportation Department's 2010 spending bill could throw in an additional $4 billion for high-speed rail, or just $1.2 billion, depending on whether the House or Senate recommendation is approved. The other big bill with potential, the six-year federal transportation spending bill, was just delayed by at least three months in the House — 18 months if the administration gets its way.

As a point of comparison for these sums, Spain's high-speed-rail system aims to put 90 percent of the population within 30 miles of a high-speed rail station. The cost? About $205 billion.

The U.S. is very different from Spain. Spain has a population of 44 million; the U.S., over 300 million. Spain is 195,000 square miles; the continental U.S. is 2,959,064 square miles. Spain's population density is well more than twice that of the continental U.S.

With such numbers in mind, it's pretty obvious that $8 billion won't go far.

So the first task is to put the money where it will do the most good, amidst the many municipalities clamoring for a cut of the cash. There are a lot: the Federal Railroad Administration, which is in charge of distributing the funds, has received applications from over 40 states for over $100 billion. California submitted a request on Friday for $4.7 billion.

How to distribute the claims? Among whom? According to what criteria? Those are the questions a recent report put out by America 2050 attempts to answer. The authors astutely point out that

> "To maintain public support for a continued federal commitment to high-speed rail, the initial investments must be viewed as a success. Al¬though there are many promising projects in smaller travel markets that should be part of a fully constructed network, these will be better positioned for success if the initial $8 billion are invested in projects that can achieve the greatest travel benefits for the largest numbers in the shortest period of time."

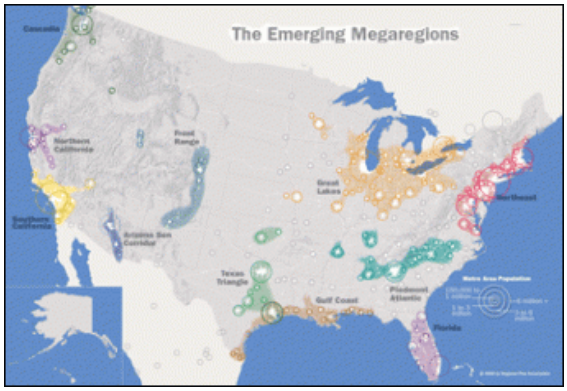
With that as a guiding principle, they rank a series of paired-cities, using a formula based on variables such as each city's GDP, if it's based in a mega-region, its distance from the other city in the pair, its population, the metropolitan area's population, and several others.

Using this formula, the New York-Washington corridor comes in first, then Boston-New York, Baltimore-New York, Los Angeles-San Francisco, Boston Philadelphia, and then several other city-pairs in central and southern California and the northeast corridor, and several cities paired with Chicago.

The authors explain why the New York-Washington corridor comes in first:

> "Population density in the Northeast mega-region is higher than anywhere else in the nation, is higher than almost anywhere in Europe, and is similar to densities in Japan. Both cities have extensive transit and regional rail systems to complement intercity rail traffic. Both cities have productive economies and have an extensive existing travel market."

They are also roughly 200 miles away from one another—the perfect distance for a high-speed bullet train, which can traverse the route at a shocking pace.



Based on their ranking system, and the realization that most of the top-50 city pairs cluster in the Northeast, South-central California, and the Mid-west, the study's authors propose divvying up the initial burst of funding into those three core areas, which they identify as HSR—high-speed-rail—Phase 1 projects.

They call for gradually strengthening the northeast corridor's already-existing rail system so high-speed trains can run on it unimpeded. They then call for a central hub out of Chicago, connecting it with Detroit, St. Louis, and Minneapolis, given Chicago's status as a major population center and economic hub in the mid-West. Finally, they propose a San Francisco-Los Angeles mega-corridor: "This system will be the nation's first 'HSR Express' service on a dedicated right of way."

Phase 2 would consist of links between many of the other top-100 city pairs and provide rail-service to 10 of the country's eleven "mega-regions," areas of high population density. Phase 3 would include medium-sized cities within 500 miles of the major mega-regional centers, and inter-link many of the regional systems into a contiguous whole.

This is sound thinking and sound planning. It will require more than $8 billion, though. A lot more. An analyst from the libertarian Cato Institute estimates that costs for a nation-wide system would exceed $500 billion, a number hinted to be dauntingly high. But TARP and the financial bailouts have cost in the high-hundreds of billions of dollars, with trillions in possible commitments. Makes $500 billion for a high-speed rail system suddenly seem very affordable.

And unlike that TARP spending, money spent on rail-infrastructure has a massive multiplier—economist-speak for the effects a given dollar of spending will have on overall economic activity.

In 2008, James S. Simpson, the administrator of the Federal Transit Administration claimed that

> "Every $1 invested in public transportation projects generates $6 in local economic activity."

California voters have already approved a $10 billion bond issue to build a high-speed transit corridor. Hopefully federal authorities makes some wise decisions and follow the America 2050 recommendations.

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(Maps: America 2050)

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