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A high-speed rail mirage

Obama's plan for a network linking major cities sounds good on paper. But as a practical solution for

improving the way we travel? Not even close.

By Randal O'Toole

At first glance, President [Obama's enthusiasm for building a high-speed rail network](#) linking major cities seems like a wise move. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that the plan would cost taxpayers billions of dollars and do little to reduce traffic congestion or improve the environment.

(Amtrak: The Acela Express makes few stops on its Northeast route./ AP)

Already California, Florida, Illinois and other states are applying for funds under the president's plan. But, except for rail contractors, Americans should find little reason to like this proposal.

Although every taxpayer would share the cost of these trains, high-speed rails are not about serving the common people. Instead, they are aimed at the elite. Japanese and French high-speed trains are attractive to tourists, but they're not heavily used by local residents. Residents of Japan and France on average ride their bullet trains less than 400 miles a year.

Pricey option

Amtrak charges a minimum of \$99 for its high-speed Acela from New York to Washington, but only \$72 for its conventional train. Fares for unsubsidized buses on this route start as low as \$20 (including free Wi-Fi), while airfares start at \$99. Only the wealthy and those whose employers cover the cost will pay the \$99 rail fare.

Obama's 9,000-mile high-speed rail plan reaches just 33 states, yet the \$13 billion he proposes to spend would cover about 2.5% to 25% of the cost, depending on how the system is built. In contrast with the interstate highway system, which paid for itself out of user fees, high-speed rail fares would not cover the capital costs and only part of the operating costs.

Most of Obama's plan should really be called "moderate-speed rail," as it would upgrade existing freight lines to run passenger trains at top speeds of 110 mph. At around \$5 million per mile, the total cost would come close to \$50 billion.

Not satisfied with moderate-speed trains, California says it wants half of all federal funds so it can build brand-new 220-mph rail lines. But it's unlikely other states will settle for the slower trains if California gets the faster ones. Building fast trains nationwide would cost at least \$500 billion. (By comparison, and adjusting for inflation, the 47,000-mile interstate highway system cost about \$425

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billion.)

Little congestion relief

Besides the high costs, these trains do little to relieve congestion. "Not a single high-speed track built to date has had any perceptible impact on the road traffic" in Europe, says Ari Vatanen, a European Parliament member. California predicts its 220-mph trains would take just 3.5% of cars off of roads. California highway traffic grows that much every two years.

Moderate-speed trains would do even less. Nor would such trains be good for the environment. Amtrak diesel trains are only a little more energy efficient than flying or driving, and pumping those trains up to 110 mph would reduce their efficiency. Because planes and cars are growing 2% more energy-efficient per year, rail would fare poorly by such measures over the next 15 to 20 years.

Moreover, high-speed rail consumes enormous amounts of energy and emits enormous volumes of greenhouse gases. These would cancel out any operational savings over cars and planes.

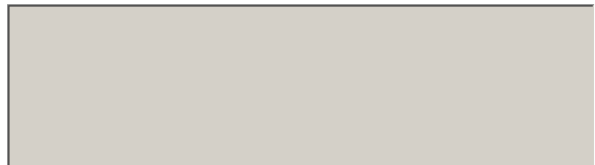
Interstates paid for themselves out of gas taxes, and most Americans use them almost every day. Rail requires huge tax subsidies and would regularly serve only a small elite. Which is the better symbol for the America President Obama wants to build?

Randal O'Toole is a senior fellow with the Cato Institute and author of The Best-Laid Plans: How Government Planning Harms Your Quality of Life, Your Pocketbook, and Your Future.

Posted at 12:14 AM/ET, May 20, 2009 in Forum commentary | [Permalink](#)

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Body (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 10h 49m ago
Not to worry Randal, your masters will still be able to sell plenty of oil. Autos and highways are not going away.

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disenchantevote (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 8h 9m ago
I wonder how much Big Oil paid for this study. No doubt the money for this article came out of Big Oil's Global Warming budget. Just how stupid are we ? This reminds me of a tobacco industry study in the 60's concluding that cigarette smoking was really good for you.

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ottohudson (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 7h 11m ago
Typical half truths. These kinds of articles never mention how much taxpayers pay for airports or to fund the nationwide FAA system. Billions.

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Dogma2312 (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 6h 47m ago
Passenger rail a money pit!

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bdbd (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 6h 40m ago

ottohudson, the majority of FAA air traffic control costs, FAA safety regulatory costs and airport grants and other funding come from taxes on passengers, airlines, fuel taxes and cargo waybill taxes. FAA costs about \$15 billion a year, but less than half of that comes from general government funds. A big chunk of passenger service airport costs come from airport passenger facility charges (PFCs).

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g_man_72 (2 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 6h 23m ago

As we are converting to European style socialism, I believe you will find their passenger rail systems must be subsidized by tax dollars in order to stay in business.

Looks like we will be spending 10's of billions to run 2/3 empty trains from St. Louis to Chicago. Wonder how the global warmingest crowd will take that?

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Fiscalbean (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 5h 4m ago

The only mirage is the one created by Mr. O'Toole. Where does Mr. O'Toole think all of the police response to crashes comes from and emergency squads and lighting bills, no to mention all of the support roads at the County and Municipal level that are paid for by property taxes here in New Jersey? A true fiscal conservative, such as I am, wants the government to use the most efficient mode possible to subsidize. It's cheaper to move a thousand people in a train than in a thousand cars. And I didn't vote for Obama!

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ottohudson (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 3h 44m ago

bdbd, quick search revealed taxpayer subsidy to Amtrak FY 2008 was 1.6b requested. Quite a smaller number than the FAA subsidy wouldn't you say?

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Ronald David (8 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 3h 34m ago

High speed be damned, American peasants need reliable and inexpensive passenger railroad service between ALL cities, big and small AND especially within big cities. That goal is what President Obambi should advocate!

The emphasis must be to permanently downsize personal (one person one vehicle) travel, as well as motor homes, monster trailers and trucks -- or is the myth of 'eternal' supplies of gasoline and diesel believable?

Money for building dedicated passenger rail system(s) is not a problem (or have some already forgotten the 8.2 trillion dollars spent on bailout of failing corporations?). We have welfare for deadbeats today, so providing free rail tickets to poor traveling workers is also, not a problem! We pay for food stamps, et cetera, paying for rail tickets and sick care is no different!

Big highway vehicles, even highways pandering to 'personal' vehicle travel MUST be eliminated. Dedicated routes for passenger rail service, replacing billions of fuel sucking vehicles, is a great idea! If this is what President Obambi is advocating, I'm all for it! (Monique has to love this revelation?)

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MoniqueDanaPoint (20 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 3h 11m ago

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