
Blocking high-speed rail

By Derrick Z. Jackson

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WHEN PRESIDENT Obama proposed in his State of the Union address that 80 percent of Americans should have access to high-speed rail within 25 years, he drew laughter by saying, "For some trips, it will be faster than flying — without the pat-down."

It will be much faster if we end the political pat-down for high-speed rail itself.

One promising hallmark of the Obama administration was the \$8 billion in stimulus funds and \$2.5 billion in subsequent grants to jump start high-speed rail projects. Several key Republicans support high speed rail in principle, even if they disagree with Obama and the Democrats on funding mechanisms and focus.

In a hearing this week, Republican Representative John Mica of Florida, the new chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, and Republican Representative Bill Shuster of Pennsylvania, chairman of the subcommittee on railroads, pipelines, and hazardous materials, called for massive public-private partnerships way beyond federally subsidized Amtrak to bring true high-speed rail to the Boston-to-Washington Northeast Corridor. Shuster even used the "I-word" currently being flayed by many Republicans: "Failing to invest in the critical Northeast Corridor will ensure continued congestion."

But too many other Republicans want to derail everything. The new governors of Ohio and Wisconsin gave back \$1.2 billion in stimulus funds for high-speed rail projects, campaigning against them as taxpayer waste. The Republican Study Committee, a caucus of 175 House Republican conservatives, wants to completely de-fund Amtrak and high-speed rail. Caucus chairman Jim Jordan of Ohio asked in 2009, "Why should we subsidize an industry that will directly compete with the automobile industry, which is so critical to our area?"

Undeterred by such sentiments and the new Republican majority in the House, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry plans to file legislation in the next few weeks that would boost high-speed rail even more. His general plan calls for the development of a national high-speed railway system with spokes radiating up and down both coasts and across to the Midwest, Southeast, and Southwest. The legislation would provide for up to \$20 billion in competitive grant funding for projects that deliver train speeds of at least 110 miles per hour and incentives and preferences for projects that can deliver speeds above that.

Kerry said he has started talking with the likes of Republican Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey, who recently rejected a new commuter rail tunnel into Manhattan, to see if concepts such as an infrastructure bank can help.

"It's so obvious that if you can bring trips down in time, we would be wasting less time from families, move products faster, raise property values, and create jobs in a larger area," Kerry said in a telephone interview this week. "It drives me crazy that we're fighting just to hold on to Amtrak, that we're arguing to hang on to the infrastructure of our parents and grandparents."

Earlier this month, a report from America 2050, a consortium of regional planners, researchers, and policy makers, found that the potential for increased train ridership and decreased auto and short-haul airspace congestion remains immense for the Northeast Corridor, the Great Lakes region, and California and the Southwest.

A study last fall by the London School of Economics found that high-speed rail significantly increases the gross domestic product of cities connected on the route, compared to unconnected cities. "By driving economic agents closer together and increasing access to regional markets, HSR [high-speed rail] should promote economic development," the study concluded.

The Boston-based Economic Development Research Group says that the job, wage, and business-sales creation of high-speed rail would be massive, whether for giant cities like Los Angeles or Chicago, or for capital cities like Albany, which would be more efficiently connected to New York City.

“The ability of people to be within two or three hours of major economic centers will change labor-market dynamics and increase our competitive advantage,” said the research group’s Stephen Fitzroy. “You give businesses a much greater access to a larger pool of skill sets and create a more diverse labor force in the process.”

With that, it is indeed crazy that we are fighting to hold on to the infrastructure of the past. It is time for high-speed rail, without the political pat-down.

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