

# Considering High-Speed Rail: Important Questions for the United States

Posted June 29, 2010 @ 12:34 pm in New Voices | [1 Comment](#)

---

By Adam Gromis



[1]

When considering high-speed rail (HSR) in the United States, “the first question to ask is: why?” Melissa Lafsky, Editor in Chief of *Infrastructurist.com*, challenged the 300 or so attendees during the final panel of the Rudin Center’s for Transportation Policy and Management’s June 16, 2010 workshop titled *HSR: Leveraging Federal Investment Locally*, held at New York University. To the relief of so many audience members, lack of American interest in HSR no longer answered Lafsky’s poignant inquiry. In fact, according to Polly Trottenberg, Assistant Secretary for Transportation Policy from the U.S. Department of Transportation who keynoted the event, the recent Recovery Act revealed a great deal of “pent up demand.” The Federal Rail Administration (FRA) received 59 applications totaling \$57 billion in requests for the \$8 billion HSR solicitation. What did these applicants want with all those bullet trains?

The Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management at New York University’s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, convened the half-day workshop to bring together scholars and policy-makers in HSR to examine the opportunities and constraints for local economic development in relation to broader national efforts. Researchers, panelists and attendees wrestled with three focal questions: how to leverage HSR for economic development, the need to integrate existing transportation networks with any new HSR, and whether the challenges of implementation in a decentralized democracy like the US can be managed as they have been in Western Europe.

## ***Economic Development***

Few argued the potential environmental and fuel efficiency benefits of HSR over the course of the day, with only a single speaker even feeling the need to define the potential oil savings

opportunities; perhaps a sign of the transportation community's growing acceptance of these benefits as given. Questions around the local economic development potential for HSR and its requisite stations fueled more intense debate. Petra Todorovich, Director of America 2050 at the Regional Plan Association, noted HSR's ability to increase mobility for service and knowledge workers, deepen labor pools, and improve industry synergies and connections. Steven Fitzroy, Director of Operations Research & Trade at the Economic Development Research Group, added higher density development around stations, the expansion of visitor markets, travel efficiency gains, and better intercity linkages.

"The high-speed rail station becomes the most important place in the city," proclaimed Parsons Brinckerhoff's David Carol, Vice President and Market Leader of High-Speed Rail. However, admitted Carol, the benefits do not occur automatically. The economic potential of HSR networks and stations is essentially determined during the planning stage. Todorovich corroborated this view, as did many others, noting that "city density and transit connectivity drive the economic development potential of high-speed rail."

Transportation and urban planning advocates take note; HSR is not an end in itself. The shortened travel times and higher-capacity mobility pathways it represents become tools in the planner's and developer's portfolio, capable of leveraging traditional precursors of economic development. MaryAnne Gilmartin, Executive Vice President for Commercial & Residential Development at Forest City Ratner pointed out that developers' tried and true requirements to start building do not change. For commercial developers to build near an HSR station, Gilmartin noted, the potential site still needs "density, a business friendly environment, opportunities for job creation, housing and affordable housing, services, and a sense of place." Bullet trains and stations do not, alone, create economic development.

### ***System Planning***

Much of the debate around potential American HSR systems, however, often considers the question of "why" long settled and focuses on "how"; much of the conversation during the workshop continued this trend. What technologies should we use: higher speed rail, true "bullet trains" or even new mag-lev technologies? Where can HSR be manufactured and can we make it here in the US? What will the American HSR model look like compared with the Japanese, French, Chinese and other nation's models? Will the traditionally underfunded Federal Rail Administration (FRA) be able to grow into an entity capable of managing a national rail effort, or even implementation of a national plan?

Apparently, almost every major city in the US has their own plan, or figures into some larger regional HSR proposal, despite relatively little if any funding for actual implementation. "We don't know what we're looking at," exclaimed David Levinson, as he flipped through 15 or so slides of various HSR maps from around the US. Levinson directs the Networks, Economics, and Urban Systems (NEXUS) research group and is an Associate Professor at the University of Minnesota. According to Levinson's review of hundreds of HSR plans over the last decade, every city's plan centers itself as the regional hub while nationally, even FRA's maps show conflicting versions with little though given to interconnectivity.

Earlier, Trottenberg noted a lack of national funding as the precondition for America's state-centric history in HSR planning. In fact, the \$8 billion for HSR dropped into the FRA through the Recovery Act increased its budget 8-fold compared to its traditional funding levels. By all measures, the United States has made only meager attempts to establish a fast, modern and efficient national passenger rail network over the last six decades, despite having one of the world's best freight systems.

## ***Confronting the Challenges Presented by a Democratic Society***

Planning should not only consider construction and interconnectivity however. Frank Zschoche, Managing Director at Civity Management Consultants in Hamburg, Germany noted the costs of managing “the democratic issue” – from right of way purchasing and property disputes, to noise and environmental concerns – in upfront planning processes as having great effect on program budgets. Herr Zschoche cited the costs of various intercity HSR developments in Europe as varying by more than a factor of five, on a per kilometer basis, due to differing public participation experiences. As heavy infrastructure, HSR requires appropriate planning for addressing the challenges of development within a democratic society.

### ***Implementation and Speed***

Anthony Perl, Professor of Urban Studies and Director of the Urban Studies Program at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, began his presentation by joking about a 1960’s attempt to strap dual jet engines to the front of a New York State Streamliner train. Professor Perl refocused the dialogue on the two alternative HSR approaches: whether to implement the program incrementally or comprehensively. Although the New York-born Perl suggested a blended future of both incrementalism and comprehensive planning, workshop participants could easily have been sorted into two camps, supporting one or the other answers to the question as how to implement HSR in the US.

The only more polarizing query posed throughout the workshop was: “true high-speed” (200+ mph) or “higher-speed rail (between 90 and 150 mph)? While some speakers such as Perl, from the academic community, and others from the policy and advocacy sides backed true high-speed, several New York State and city government representatives heralded the latter. Bill Wheeler, Director of Special Project Development and Planning at MTA, Tokumbo Shobowale, Chief of Staff to the Deputy Mayor for Economic Development, and Michael Evans, Lieutenant Governor Richard Ravitch’s Chief of Staff, all cited the great potential of higher-speed rail to increase the City’s commuter capacity and extend the labor pool. In their view, the incremental costs of going from higher to true bullet speeds outweighed the purported benefits.

### ***Levels of Inquiry***

A few, however, did not agree that “how fast” was the appropriate question; nor “what technology”, or “incremental or comprehensive” or “where” or “what” or “how” or “how much”. “The dialogue should not focus on speed,” reminded Assistant Secretary Trottenberg during the keynote, “but on customer value.” Who is the customer? Considering economic development opportunities and democratic challenges, HSR has many stakeholders beyond the passengers. Bill Wheeler, Director of Special Project Development and Planning at MTA, appropriately bookended the day with a reframing of Trottenberg’s view. “You have to paint a picture for communities. It’s not the vision [of a national plan], but how HSR moves their priorities forward.”

The questions that challenge HSR similarly encumber all transportation modes, policies and innovations in the US. It’s become easier to ask “how much are we funding plug-in hybrids this year”, or “how can we create policies that sustain highways and bridges as fuel efficiency increases”, and “how do we support airlines given a high-speed rail intercity system” than to simply start with “what do we want”. What do we want? The model has been: the given sector picks a mode, selects a technology, figures out the funding and then asks questions.

Questions such as “where are we going” and “what does the future we want look like,” though they precede mode and technology, only arise philosophically.

Unless federal and state policies, funding mechanisms and initiatives can move toward an outcomes-based regime focused on goals, we can only expect the miasma of questions to continue focusing on the means regardless of the ends. “Why HSR” is only an important question if it arises in a context of asking “what are the goals for me and my community”. Trottenberg’s question about how HSR can add value could and should extend to all transportation modes and technologies; even across sectors to energy, housing and others. The answers rely on how well we, as Americans, understand what we value. How DO we want to live and move? Any driver or transit passenger in the country knows you should decide where you want to go before deciding how you want to get there.

More information about the HSR workshop discussed above, *HSR: Leveraging Federal Investment Locally*, including the full list of speakers and panelists and links to all presentations, please visit <http://wagner.nyu.edu/rudincenter/conferences/symposia.php> <sup>[2]</sup>.

For more about the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy & Management, please visit <http://wagner.nyu.edu/rudincenter/about/> <sup>[3]</sup>.

Adam Gromis, a recent graduate of the Wagner School of Public Service and the Stern School of business, worked as a research assistant at the Rudin Center in 2009-2010.

---

## 1 Comment To "Considering High-Speed Rail: Important Questions for the United States"

**#1 Pingback** By [Tweets that mention New York Transportation Journal | NYU Wagner Rudin Center » High-speed Rail, What’s the Important Question? | NYU Wagner Rudin Center — Topsy.com](#) On June 29, 2010 @ 1:43 pm

[...] This post was mentioned on Twitter by Heather Fenyk, Chris Carnduff. Chris Carnduff said: New York Transportation Journal | NYU Wagner Rudin Center » High ... <sup>[4]</sup> [...]

---

Article printed from New York Transportation Journal | NYU Wagner Rudin Center:  
<http://wagner.nyu.edu/rudincenter/journal>

URL to article: <http://wagner.nyu.edu/rudincenter/journal/2010/06/high-speed-rail-what%e2%80%99s-the-important-question/>

URLs in this post:

[1] Image: <http://wagner.nyu.edu/rudincenter/journal/2010/06/high-speed-rail-what%e2%80%99s-the-important-question/pollylong-3/>

[2] <http://wagner.nyu.edu/rudincenter/conferences/symposia.php>:

**<http://wagner.nyu.edu/rudincenter/journal../conferences/symposia.php>**

[3] <http://wagner.nyu.edu/rudincenter/about/>:

**<http://wagner.nyu.edu/rudincenter/journal../about/>**

[4] : **<http://bit.ly/axzZML>**

Copyright © 2009 New York Transportation Journal | NYU Wagner Rudin Center. All rights reserved.