The demise of U.S. high-speed rail has been greatly exaggerated. With more than $10 billion in appropriations since 2009 and 32 states and the District of Columbia advancing 13 different projects, American high-speed rail is on track and scheduled to yield its first fruits as early as 2012.

It will be a bumpy road. It will be a long road. And it will be different from the European or Asian systems, but, yes, America will have high-speed rail. In fact, demand for funding—greater than at any other time in modern U.S. history—is far exceeding supply. Thirty-nine states have submitted some 500 applications requesting more than $75 billion in funding since the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) launched the stimulus application process in 2009.

Today, 13 high-speed and intercity passenger rail programs in 32 states and the District of Columbia are moving forward. Federal and state matching funds are being used to plan systems, perform environmental and engineering work, increase existing passenger rail train speeds and break ground on true high-speed rail tracks.

So, why are some saying U.S. high-speed rail is dead?

The U.S. has less than 3,100 miles of railways in operation or in the planning stages that are or will be capable of running at a speed of at least 155 mph compared with about 7,500 miles in Europe and more than 10,600 miles in Asia.

Still on the rails
Progress doesn't follow a linear path. Its trajectory has peaks and valleys. This year, Ohio, Wisconsin and Florida returned federal high-speed rail monies. And Congress rescinded $400 million of 2010 unallocated monies and eliminated $1 billion appropriated in 2011 high-speed rail funding. These high-profile events prompted opponents to declare high-speed rail had met an early demise. The truth is these cuts are neither devastating nor do they signal the end of high-speed rail in America.

In May 2011, the U.S. DOT redistributed to 15 states and Amtrak the $2 billion that Florida, Wisconsin and Ohio declined. Twenty-four governors—12 Democrats, 11 Republicans and one Independent—applied for that money. In all, the FRA received 100 applications totaling $10 billion, sending a clear message to Congress that the majority of states want high-speed rail.
Further, Rep. John Mica, a Republican from Florida and chair of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said he supports high-speed rail development in places where it makes sense, such as Amtrak’s Northeast Corridor.

And let us not forget during a May 9, 2011, press teleconference, U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said high-speed rail remains one of the Obama administration’s top priorities with the FY 2012 budget designating $53 billion over six years.

Global investment in high-speed rail through 2020:
- China: $300 billion;
- Spain: $136 billion;
- France: $75 billion;
- Vietnam: $56 billion;
- Japan: $50 billion;
- United Kingdom: $50 billion; and
- United States: $13 billion.

In total, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 and annual appropriations have provided $10.1 billion to improve access, reliability, speed and frequency of U.S. intercity and high-speed passenger rail. Of that, approximately $5.8 billion has been obligated for projects.

Make no mistake, high-speed rail is alive and well in the U.S.

Picking up steam

Although high-speed rail projects are under consideration in North Carolina, Oregon, Texas and Washington state, we are seeing real investment and progress in California, the Midwest and the Northeast regions.

As for when you can buy a ticket, that time is closer than you think.

Today, riders in the Northeast can jump on board the Amtrak Acela Express and regional trains that operate at speeds more than 110 mph, with Acela operating at a maximum authorized speed of 150 mph on two sections of track in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Beyond this, we could see other high-speed trains in the Northeast Corridor in the next few years.

In the Midwest, the first operational corridor will be the Chicago-St. Louis line, which will reach top speeds of 110 mph as early as July 2012. In Michigan, we expect to see trains traveling at 110 mph for 235 miles of the Chicago-Detroit-Pontiac High-Speed Rail Corridor by the end of 2014.

If you are a purist and maintain high-speed rail is 200 mph and above, as the Europeans do, then California may be home to the first true U.S. high-speed train. California is the only state currently funded to progress dedicated high-speed rail. The first operational segment will be between Fresno and Bakersfield, and it should be completed by 2017.

Meanwhile, passengers of existing intercity rail systems will see incremental, substantive improvements in safety, grade crossings, reliability, infrastructure and time savings.

The following is a project-by-project look at high-speed rail’s progress in the Northeast, Midwest and California, including how the May 2011 funds were redistributed:

Northeast
- The Northeast Corridor (Amtrak) received $450 million to boost capacity, reliability and speed in a heavily traveled 24-mile segment of track. The upgrades will allow the segment to support speeds of up to 160 mph south of New York and improve complex interlocking at New York Penn Station;
- In partnership with Amtrak, Maryland was awarded $22 million for engineering and environmental work to replace the century-old Susquehanna River Bridge, currently the site of frequent delays due to a high volume of critical maintenance;
- New York received $295 million to construct the Amtrak bypass and Harold interlocking routes, which will alleviate major delays for trains in and out of Manhattan;
- Rhode Island was given $25 million for design and construction of an additional 1.5 miles of third track in Kingston, so high-speed trains operating at up to 150 mph can pass trains on a heavily traveled section of the Northeast Corridor. In addition, the state received a $3 million grant.

How is the freight community responding?

The freight industry is concerned about the business impacts high-speed rail will have on shared-use corridors. Passenger trains will use vital capacity on freight corridors, and that costs freight operators money and may affect their reliability, flexibility and expandability. On a shared-use corridor, high-speed rail will operate on a dedicated right-of-way that represents a reduced capacity for future freight expansion. On a mixed-use corridor, the freight infrastructure must be enhanced to offset capacity loss but will reduce operating speeds for passenger service consistent with the infrastructure’s design limit.

Other concerns include:

- How will high-speed trains affect safety?
- How will high-speed trains affect freight capacity?
- What liability issues will freight railroads face?
- Who will cover the ongoing operational and maintenance costs of high-speed trains?
- How will dedicated high-speed train tracks located in freight railroad rights-of-way affect the growth potential of freight railroads?

Those aren’t minor tension points. High-speed rail will have a major impact on freight. The passenger rail industry must recognize these roadblocks and collaborate with freight operators for a resolution that will make participating worthwhile. In sum, the objective is to seek win-win solutions, and there are many precedents around the world and in the U.S. where an investment in passenger capacity on a freight railroad will yield benefits to both.
By the first quarter of 2012, California will have selected a design-build contractor for initial construction of the state’s high-speed rail system. Groundbreaking also is scheduled for 2012 with completion by 2017.

for preliminary engineering and environmental work to renovate Providence Station;

- Connecticut was awarded $30 million to complete double-track segments between New Haven, Conn., and Springfield, Mass.;
- Massachusetts and Maine collectively received $20.8 million to construct 10.4 miles of double track between Wilmington, Mass., and Andover, Maine;
- The New York State Empire Corridor Capacity Improvement Project received an additional $58 million to construct track upgrades, stations and signals between Albany, Schenectady and Rensselaer;
- Western New York collected $1.4 million to conduct preliminary engineering and environmental analysis for a new Rochester Intermodal Station on the Empire Corridor; and
- Pennsylvania received an additional $40 million to rebuild an interlocking near Harrisburg that will improve trip times and reliability on the Keystone Corridor.

**Midwest**

- Illinois received $186.3 million to complete additional work on the Chicago-St. Louis corridor between Dwight and Joliet with trains operating at 110 mph for more than 220 miles. Design and some construction are under way;
- Michigan was awarded $196.5 million to continue to purchase portions of the corridor between Chicago and Detroit for the Kalamazoo-Dearborn segment and to install track and signal improvements that will increase current operational efficiency and speeds to 110 mph;
- Iowa and Illinois are partnering to implement service between Chicago and Iowa City. Iowa received approximately $283 million to make track improvements, conduct environmental and design work and procure equipment to initiate service between the two cities;
- Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan and Missouri were collectively awarded $268.2 million for locomotives and coach equipment;
- Minnesota received $5 million to complete engineering and environmental work on the Northern Lights Express Project, which links
the Twin Cities and Duluth with 110-mph service; and
- Missouri was awarded $13.5 million to advance design in replacing the Merchant’s Bridge across the Mississippi River on the Chicago-St. Louis corridor.

California
California is building an 800-mile high-speed rail system that will consist of 24 stations and operate at speeds of 220 mph. Initially the system will run from San Francisco to Los Angeles via the Central Valley and later to Sacramento and San Diego. In the latest round of funding, California received $300 million to advance work on a 20-mile extension along the Central Valley Corridor, the backbone of the system. Work will extend the track and civil work from Fresno to the “Wye” junction, providing a connection to San Jose to the west and Merced to the north.

By the first quarter of 2012, the California High-Speed Rail Authority will have selected a design-build contractor for initial construction of the state’s high-speed rail system, a 100-mile section of infrastructure between Fresno and Bakersfield. Groundbreaking also is scheduled for 2012 with completion by 2017. The line will be new track designed to high-speed rail standards with two stations and a maintenance facility.

The authority has targeted 2020 for completion of the entire system, linking the San Francisco Bay Area to Los Angeles in less than two hours and 40 minutes at speeds of up to 220 mph (a six-hour trip by car).

Building in fits and starts
America remains bullish on high-speed rail, not for the good of the mode itself but to create a balanced, multimodal transportation system for the U.S. High-speed rail is the missing link that can rebalance our system, relieving some of the burden from our roads and airports. It is a transformational investment that will deliver greater mobility and short- and long-term economic benefits for the next 100 years.

But states cannot build this grand vision in $1 billion increments. Imagine building and furnishing a house in $1,000 increments—not knowing if or when those increments will be available. With such an unpredictable funding source, the project soon becomes piecemealed and shortsighted. Contractors and suppliers lose interest. Financial institutions, skeptical of the final outcome, refuse to give loans to complete the project. That is no way to build a house let alone a world-class intercity and high-speed passenger rail system.

U.S. high-speed rail needs a secure, sustainable funding source. Thus, the real issue is whether funding will continue, and right now we have no answer to that question. Competition for funding among all modes of transportation is one of high-speed rail’s biggest obstacles. Members of Congress and their staffers speculate that we may not see a transportation authorization bill this year, and if we do, we should lower our expectations for both high-speed rail funding and a sustained funding source.

Do not be surprised if high-speed rail funding plateaus for the next two years and then picks up again after the 2012 elections.

Opponents see high-speed rail as another endlessly subsidized service, but this mode actually presents a legitimate business opportunity for the private sector. Sure, taxpayers will pay for the initial capital investment, but that is no different from how we build an airport, a highway or any other mode of transportation.

Stoked with steady revenue
What is different is that high-speed rail, in some specific cases such as California and other dedicated European and Asian systems, can cover their operating and maintenance costs, and make a profit to attract the private sector. High-speed rail’s ability to generate a steady revenue stream and its potential to create a return on investment are attractive to private developers. What is not different is that high-speed rail like every other public utility is subsidized to a certain extent because it provides a benefit to the greater public. Like our highway, aviation and communication systems, a public investment in high-speed rail will yield economic growth, job creation and an improved quality of life.

The financial community is interested, too. They are attending meetings to learn more, but time is about all they are willing to invest right now. Because high-speed rail cannot show a secure, sustainable source of federal funding, financiers view it as highly speculative. They are happy to finance operation and maintenance over the long term once the system is in place, but they are not willing to put up the capital to build it.

What we need is a completed project on American soil that can serve as a template for future success. Once Americans sample this mode’s ease, efficiency and speed, they won’t be able to get enough of it.

Other countries show a precedent for this approach. The initial lines opening in Spain and Asia, for example, triggered an insatiable demand for a national network of high-speed rail. We have every reason to believe that this will be the case in the U.S., too. We are a nation that thrives on the freedom to move about the country when we want, where we want. High-speed rail will extend that freedom and preserve our treasured mobility.

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