



Taking Illinoisans for a Ride

False promises of high-speed rail

The Problem

Would you pay \$1,000 so that someone—probably not you—could ride high-speed trains less than 60 miles a year? Probably not. Yet, that's what the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) high-speed rail plan is going to cost: at least \$90 billion, or \$1,000 for every federal income taxpayer in the country.

Who will ride these rails? The most ardent supporters of high-speed rail predict that when the FRA plan is completely built, it will carry Americans 58 miles per person a year. By comparison, the average American travels by automobile more than 15,000 miles per year. The average Illinoisan will take a round trip on high-speed rail once every 8.7 years—and in actual practice, for every Illinois resident who rides high-speed rail once a month, more than 100 Illinoisans will never ride it.

Illinois's portion of the federal plan will cost more than \$1.2 billion. Adding proposed lines to Rock Island, Quincy, and Carbondale will bring the total to \$3.6 billion, or \$280 for every Illinois resident, plus tens of millions more per year in operating subsidies.

Don't expect super-fast bullet trains for all this money. In Illinois, and most of the rest of the country, the FRA is merely proposing to boost the top speeds of Amtrak trains from 79 miles per hour to 110 mph (with average speeds of only 60-75 mph). Moderate-speed trains like this are not going to relieve highway congestion. Even California predicts that its true high-speed trains will take only 3.8 percent of traffic off of parallel roads. Since traffic grows that much every two years, high-speed rail is an extremely costly—and ineffective—way of treating congestion.

Nor is high-speed rail good for the environment. The Department of Energy

says that, in intercity travel, automobiles are as energy-efficient as Amtrak, and that boosting Amtrak trains to higher speeds will make them less energy-efficient and more polluting than driving.

Our Solution

An expensive rail system used by a small portion of Illinoisans is not change we can believe in. Illinois should use its share of the \$8 billion in rail stimulus funds for incremental improvements to existing rail lines (including safer crossing gates and better signaling). It should not plan to purchase new locomotives and railcars for passenger service that will be both expensive to operate and harmful to the environment.

Further, Illinois should ask the Federal Railroad Administration to not commit the federal government to funding expensive new high-speed lines such as the proposed lines in California or Florida. Illinois taxpayers shouldn't be put on the hook for wasteful boondoggles elsewhere.

Why this Works

High-speed rail is a technology whose time has come and gone. What might have been useful a century ago is today merely an anachronism that will cost taxpayers tens or hundreds of billions of dollars yet contribute little to mobility or environmental quality.

People who want to save energy should encourage the state to relieve the traffic congestion that wastes nearly 3 billion gallons of fuel each year. Traffic signal coordination and other common-sense, low-cost techniques can do more to relieve congestion and save energy than high-speed rail, and at a far lower cost.

Illinois can do many things to cost-effectively improve transportation networks in ways that save energy, reduce accidents, and cut toxic and greenhouse gas emissions. High-speed rail is not one of those things.

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