

Biden: \$8 billion targeted for high-speed rail

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The first of \$8 billion in financing for high-speed trains on lines such as the Philadelphia-Pittsburgh corridor will be made by late summer, Vice President Biden said today.

Biden met with state governors, including Gov. Rendell, at the White House today to urge them to think boldly in planning for trains that could travel up to 150 m.p.h. He said funding from the federal economic stimulus package could "jump-start" a high-speed rail network to improve the nation's "terrible passenger rail system."

The federal government is to issue detailed guidelines to the states by June 17 on how \$8 billion in stimulus funding is to be awarded. Biden said the first payments, "by the end of the summer," would go to improving existing systems where work could begin quickly with measurable impacts. One such system is the Keystone Corridor between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

The state in 2006 completed a \$145 million upgrade to the Philadelphia-Harrisburg portion of the Keystone Corridor, allowing state-subsidized Amtrak trains to make the one-way trip in about an hour and 40 minutes.

With the faster trips and additional trains, ridership between Philadelphia and Harrisburg has increased by 26 percent in the last two years, state officials said.

The Keystone Corridor is one of 10 corridors identified as potential high-speed rail routes eligible for funding from the \$8 billion. In addition to the stimulus money, President Obama has requested \$5 billion in his budget for high-speed rail.

Speaking to reporters after the White House meeting, Biden said the United States needed a high-speed rail system like those in France, Spain and parts of China.

"We do know that \$8 billion won't put in place an entire high-speed rail network . . . but it's 8 billion times more than we had," Biden said. He said such a network would reduce highway and air traffic congestion and reduce air pollution.

Pennsylvania Department of Transportation planners are looking at using stimulus money for improving the Philadelphia-Harrisburg route, adding service to the existing one daily round-trip between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh, and restoring rail service between Scranton and New York.

A draft of a national rail plan is supposed to be ready by mid-October, outlining a nationwide system of linked rail corridors.

"It's close to embarrassing internationally that we have such a terrible passenger rail system, relatively speaking, in the United States," Biden told the governors today.

Biden has long been an advocate of rail travel, as a regular Amtrak commuter between Washington and Wilmington during his tenure as a U.S. senator. He said he had made about 7,900 round trips of 250 miles a day.

The Obama administration, with its focus on rail travel, has reversed long-standing efforts to reduce or eliminate federal aid to Amtrak.

Citing the creation of jobs and other "long-term economic and environmental consequences," Biden said a national effort to build high-speed rail lines could transform national transportation much as the building of the interstate highway network did in the 1950s and 1960s.

"The question gets down to how are we going to rebalance the transportation network," Biden said.

Some critics contend Obama's proposal is doomed to fail because the country is not dense enough, even in the Northeast, to support a costly investment in upgraded rail service.

In addition to Rendell at the White House today were governors from Illinois, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Also attending the roundtable session were transportation officials from New Jersey, Delaware, California, Florida, Iowa, Maryland, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, Rhode Island and West Virginia.