

Hi-speed rail advocates say \$8B is just a start

WASHINGTON -- Communities and companies seeking to build high-speed rail systems haven't yet received the \$8 billion in stimulus money the Obama administration promised for the projects, and already they want more -- a lot more, the Associated Press reports.

The consensus at a conference for high-speed rail proponents here this week was that the federal government should ante up substantially more to demonstrate the long-term financial commitment to make the projects viable.

The U.S. High Speed Rail Association is promoting a plan for a 17,000-mile, national network of 220 mph bullet trains -- a wish list of every potentially credible project. The estimated price tag: \$600 billion over 20 years.

That's a lot of money, conceded Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Texas, who addressed the conference. By the time a national network gets built, "I think it's going to be that much," Johnson said.

At least \$150 billion is needed for a serious start on a national high-speed rail network, said Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, a rail proponent. Then he added: "We're probably talking about more than that."

The entire \$8 billion for high-speed and intercity passenger rail included in the economic stimulus program enacted by Congress earlier this year is only a third of the cost of constructing a single high-speed line from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh -- an estimated \$20 billion to \$25 billion, Rendell said.

"We haven't yet made a serious commitment to high-speed rail," said Rendell, who has joined with New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to form Building America's Future to promote rail and other transportation projects.

The inclusion of the rail money in the stimulus bill sparked fierce competition among state officials, many of whom have long thirsted for speedy bullet trains like those in Europe and Japan. The Obama administration initially hoped to begin awarding some of the \$8 billion in September, but that timetable has been pushed back to later this year or early next.

The Federal Railroad Administration has received applications from 24 states seeking \$50 billion for high-speed projects, more than six times the available funds.

The agency has also received 214 applications from 34 states totaling \$7 billion to beef up service between cities by trains traveling less than 110 miles per hour. Those projects are also eligible for a share of the \$8 billion.

Administration officials continue to talk up their vision of a rail renaissance, describing the \$8 billion as a down payment. They've also been trying to downplay expectations, given the likelihood that most states could go away empty-handed.

Joseph Szabo, Federal Railroad Administration administrator, said state interest in the high-speed rail program "far exceeds the funds available today, or next year or over the next five years."

Officials for companies who want to build the rail systems or supply the trains said they worry the administration will bend to pressure to spread the money around instead of concentrating it on a single project or two or three projects.

It's important to get at least a small section of one project up and running to build public support for more funding, said Tadashi Keneko, a representative of the Japan International Transportation Institute, which works with Japanese rail companies eager to enter the U.S. market.

In addition to the \$8 billion, the White House requested Congress approve another \$1 billion a year for the next five years for high-speed rail. The House went further, proposing \$4 billion for next year, but the Senate has approved only \$1.5 billion.