

# U.S. High-Speed Rail Projects Aim to Catch Up

By Larry Greenemeier

When the Obama administration promised \$8 billion for rail service improvements earlier this year as part of its \$787-billion economic stimulus package, it opened a flood of interest in high-speed railroads, a mode of transport that has languished in the U.S. despite successes in east Asia, Europe and other parts of the world.

The lure of stimulus money, plus a separate five-year, \$5 billion investment in high-speed rail beginning as part of the administration's suggested fiscal year 2010 budget, has led to 45 applications from 24 states for a total of \$50 billion in long-term, high-speed rail corridor projects, and another 214 requests from 24 states for a total of \$7 billion for the smaller, "shovel-ready" work. Interest has been so great that the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) has had to push back the first round of grants, which the FRA initially promised to award by late summer, until early next year.

President Obama's plan is to invest federal money "in an efficient, high-speed passenger rail network of 100- to 600-mile [160- to 965-kilometer] intercity corridors that connect communities across America," according to an announcement the administration made in April. This is a change in strategy for the U.S., which has focused more on road and air transportation since World War II, whereas the governments of the more densely populated countries in Asia and Europe put their money into relieving their overcrowded railways. Rising fuel costs and an emphasis on "greener" modes of transportation are shifting priorities in the U.S.

Still, the proposed U.S. projects have their work cut out for them if they hope to match the speed and popularity of established high-speed rail systems in other parts of the world. China in particular is expected to invest about \$300 billion in its railway infrastructure over the next three years, expanding its network by more than 20,000 kilometers, including 13,000 kilometers of track designed for high-speed trains capable of traveling up to 355 kilometers per hour. This is one of the reasons Erie, Pa.-based GE Transportation inked a deal on last week with China's Ministry of Railways to better learn how to develop high-speed rail projects in the U.S.