

Midwestern States All Aboard High-Speed-Rail Push

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Of the regions vying for grants from the \$8 billion set aside by the Obama administration for the development of high-speed rail, the plan centered in the president's hometown seems to be one of the front-runners — but it's not just because of Chicago's clout in the White House these days.

The proposed high-speed "Chicago hub network" is an ambitious plan that would link Chicago with 11 other metropolitan areas.

Advocates say the development of high-speed rail in the region makes sense because of the concentration of people there who could be served by it.

"We've got a third of the population of the U.S. living within 500 miles of Chicago," says Rick Harnish, executive director of the Midwest High Speed Rail Association, a nonprofit high-speed-rail advocacy group. Harnish and others say high-speed rail works best and is most competitive as a travel option for distances of 500 miles or fewer.

Regional Collaboration

The governors of eight states — Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri and Iowa — have signed an agreement to work together to bring high-speed rail to the region.

"We're talking about fast trains," said Illinois' Democratic Gov. Patrick Quinn at a high-speed-rail summit he hosted for Midwestern governors and transportation officials in July. "Things that can get people from Chicago to St. Louis, Chicago to Detroit, Chicago to Milwaukee, Chicago to Minneapolis, Chicago to Cleveland, Chicago to Iowa City — faster than you can drive a car."

The Midwestern governors want to first introduce trains that travel 110 mph. They say such a network would reduce greenhouse gas emission in their states, reduce traffic congestion and boost their economies.

While the region already has trains that can travel at speeds faster than 90 mph through a portion of Michigan, en route to Detroit, 79 mph is the top speed for most Amtrak trains in the Midwest. And there are considerable stretches where the trains travel much more slowly.

Eventually, advocates of high-speed rail envision an entirely separate system that would whisk passengers at speeds of 220 mph between Chicago and other Midwestern cities.

"It is important this is not just transportation," Quinn said. "It is job economic development, and investing in rail has an economic dividend for our region."

Rejuvenating The Midwest Economy

The Midwest has been bleeding manufacturing jobs in recent years, and no state has taken a hit worse than Michigan. The state's Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm says high-speed rail will bring in new opportunities.

"I think the economists have projected that this project in the Midwest would create 57,000 permanent jobs and 15,000 construction jobs, which could last a good number of years," Granholm says.

Some Midwest manufacturers of locomotives, train cars and parts already report an uptick in business because of the new push for high-speed rail. Wisconsin has struck a \$47 million deal with the Spanish company Talgo to locate a new factory in the state to build rail cars for the new tracks between Chicago, Milwaukee and Madison.

The Need For Speed

Many riders on Amtrak's Hiawatha line between Chicago and Milwaukee seem to like the idea of reducing their travel time from about 90 minutes to an hour.

"Wouldn't it be great?" rail rider Dennis Kennedy says.

"I would love it," passenger Judy Musil adds. "That's the only thing I hate about going to Chicago is the length of time it takes to get there."

But some think the plan for the Chicago hub network is not ambitious enough.

"If you're only cutting off 20 minutes, it wouldn't make sense for that kind of infrastructure [spending]," rider Chad Beneda says. Rather than incrementally upgrading the speed to 110 mph, Beneda would prefer going to 220-mph trains right away. "An hour difference [in travel time] — that's something that would be great for Milwaukee and Chicago."

The Midwest states estimate that upgrading Amtrak's service between Chicago and St. Louis, Detroit and Milwaukee, and creating new service to Madison, Wis. — with trains that can travel up to 110 mph — would cost \$4 billion. And it would cost an additional \$8 billion to add 110-mph service from Chicago to Minneapolis, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, and Des Moines, Iowa; and from St. Louis to Kansas City, Mo.

The Congestion Problem

Some riders worry that getting up to faster speeds will be difficult to achieve.

Jeff Crump, a computer consultant who rides the Milwaukee-to-Chicago line several times a week, believes trains traveling at 110 mph would need their own dedicated track.

"Because I know that this train shares tracks with commuter trains around Chicago and the freight [trains] between Wisconsin and Illinois and there's a lot of stopping," he says.

Delays are a frequent problem for Amtrak trains going in and out of Chicago because the rails are severely congested, a problem that dates back more than a century and a half, when Chicago developed as the nation's freight-rail hub.

"There was no central plan for railroad infrastructure in Chicago," says Harnish of the Midwest High Speed Rail Association. "It was built piecemeal by separate companies over the years and it's kind of a tangled mess."

Nearly 40 percent of freight carried by rail comes from, to or through Chicago on 500 freight trains daily.

The rail congestion is so bad that a recent study found freight trains average a speed of just 9 mph through the Chicago area. A freight shipment that takes two days to get from the West Coast to Chicago can sometimes take another two days just to get through Chicago.

Amtrak's passenger trains run on the same railroad tracks, as do some 700 Chicago-area commuter trains.

Transportation officials say passenger trains simply cannot run at high speeds in and out of Chicago until the freight gridlock is broken up.

There are requests for stimulus funding to help do that. Plus, the state of Illinois recently committed \$300 million to ease railroad congestion around Chicago, and the major freight railroads are kicking in some

money as well, under a partnership called the CREATE (Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency) program.

An Even Faster Future

Harnish says that while incremental improvements are being made to boost Amtrak trains to 110 mph in the Midwest, the region also needs to begin planning for the future for trains that would go twice that fast.

"We also have to figure out where we're going to put the new, dedicated 220-mph tracks that will get Chicago to St. Louis in two hours, Chicago to Cleveland in two hours, Chicago to Minneapolis-St. Paul in 2 1/2," he says.

His group has identified a route to St. Louis and estimates it would cost \$12 billion to build the super-high-speed service.

That, however, is likely a long way off.

Though there is going to be a coordinated push for high-speed rail in the Midwest, even the folks with clout, like Democratic Sen. Richard Durbin of Illinois, say this project is likely to move in increments.

"It's not like when you cut a ribbon on a highway and then you soon see cars on the highway," he says. "It won't all happen at once, but I can tell you, people are so hungry for it."