

Vice President Biden, Secretary LaHood meet with governors on future of U.S. high-speed rail (The U.S. Department of Transportation issued the following press release on June 3, 2009.)

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Vice President Joe Biden and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood challenged governors to think boldly when designing high-speed rail plans during a roundtable discussion at the White House today. The session was a unique opportunity for state leaders to share their ideas with the Obama Administration about the future of high-speed trains in America.

In April, President Obama released a strategic plan outlining his vision for high-speed rail. The plan identifies \$13 billion in federal funds -- \$8 billion in the Recovery Act and \$5 billion requested in the President's budget -- to jump-start a potential world-class passenger rail system and sets the direction of transportation policy for the future. Detailed guidance for up to the first \$8 billion in federal grant applications will be announced later this month and the first round of grants are expected to be awarded as soon as late summer 2009.

In developing the high-speed rail program, Administration officials have sought extensive input from states, Congress, labor, industry, rail experts from countries with working high-speed rail networks, and other key stakeholders. Today's roundtable follows Secretary LaHood's recent fact-finding trip to several European countries where he met with transportation officials and rail operators and witnessed first-hand the operations of working high-speed rail systems. Other senior U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) officials recently hosted a series of seven regional workshops around the country.

"Everyone knows I'm a big believer in our nation's rail system -- I've devoted a big part of my career doing what I can to support it -- and I'm proud that this Administration is about to transform that system fundamentally," said Vice President Biden. "Thanks to an \$8 billion investment from the Recovery Act, we're going to start building a high-speed rail system that will loosen the congestion suffocating our highways and skyways, and make travel in this country leaner, meaner and a whole lot cleaner."

"America is ready to embrace a new level of passenger rail service that offers a safe, convenient, and sustainable way to travel from city to city, and region to region," said Secretary LaHood. "President Obama has handed us an extraordinary opportunity -- and now it is up to all of us to seize the moment. With creative input and contributions from governors across the country, I believe we'll be able to do just that."

President Obama's vision for high-speed rail mirrors that of President Eisenhower, the father of the U.S. Interstate highway system, which revolutionized the way Americans traveled. Now, high-speed rail has the potential to reduce U.S. dependence on oil, lower harmful carbon emissions, foster new economic development and give travelers more choices when it comes to moving around the country.

In attendance for today's roundtable: Governors Pat Quinn, Illinois; Sonny Perdue, Georgia; Deval Patrick, Massachusetts; Jennifer Granholm, Michigan; Jay Nixon, Missouri; Ed Rendell, Pennsylvania; Tim Kaine, Virginia; and Jim Doyle, Wisconsin. In addition, state transportation officials from California, Delaware, Florida, Iowa, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, Rhode Island and West Virginia were also attended the roundtable.

Biden: \$8 billion targeted for high-speed rail (The following story by Paul

Nussbaum appeared on the Philadelphia Inquirer website on June 3, 2009.)

PHILADELPHIA — 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.

High-speed rail: Biden praises Midwest plan to enhance passenger train system (The following story by Mike Dorning and Jon Hilkevitch appeared on the Chicago Tribune June 4, 2009.)

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Obama administration officials offered encouraging signs Wednesday that a proposed Midwest high-speed rail network based around a Chicago hub has an inside track on a significant piece of \$8 billion to be distributed among 10 major U.S. projects.

Vice President Joe Biden lauded the Midwest proposal, which envisions passenger trains speeding through the region at 110 m.p.h., as "one of the most comprehensive plans that have been put forward so far."

The full 3,000-mile Midwest corridor system stretching over nine states would cost \$9.6 billion to construct over 10 years, according to the latest estimate.

But "for \$3.4 billion, you can get a big chunk of this plan done," Biden said in a conference call with reporters.

The administration gathered eight governors, including Gov. Pat Quinn, for a roundtable at the White House on Wednesday. Interviewed at the White House afterward, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, a former Illinois congressman, noted that Obama and his chief of staff, Chicagoan Rahm Emanuel, have taken an intense interest in the rail initiative. He suggested that that would work in favor of substantial financial support for a Midwest network.

Obama and Emanuel made funding for high-speed rail a priority in negotiations over the economic stimulus package. In addition to the \$8 billion secured in the economic stimulus, the White House has asked for another \$5 billion over the next five years.

"This is the president's initiative," LaHood said. "I mean he and Rahm personally saw to it that Congress included \$8 billion for high-speed rail. And I don't want to answer to the president why we're not doing something in the Midwest."

According to transportation experts, the Midwest bid also will merit support because of Chicago's central role in the nation's rail and other transportation networks.

"Based on the conversations I had with the governors today, I think [the Midwest] will have as good a proposal as any that we will receive," LaHood said. "Everyone will have a reasonable chance."

At a meeting earlier in the day to strategize on funding with Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), Quinn announced plans for a July summit of Midwest governors to address high-speed rail in Chicago. He said he and the other governors will coordinate plans and try to muster enthusiasm among mayors, members of Congress and business.

"The point is, the more people who are invested in this, the better," Quinn said. He added that a successful Olympic bid for Chicago could add political immediacy to the regional project.

Regardless of how much money the Midwest project receives in the first round of funding, the initial phase of work in and around Chicago, St. Louis and Detroit would concentrate on eliminating slow zones, where Amtrak passenger trains often travel as slow as 10 m.p.h. because of freight train interference and antiquated tracks and signals.

The goal would be to increase those speeds to 30 to 50 m.p.h. initially and faster later, operating in accordance with the philosophy of rail experts that the key to going fast is to not go slow.

The Federal Railroad Administration will issue guidelines for applications by June 17, and Biden said grants will start rolling this summer.

The first category of grants will focus on improving existing rail systems and putting people to work under the economic recovery plan, the vice president said. The strategy appears to benefit the Midwest proposal.

The second round will go toward building sections of corridors and aiding high-speed rail programs such as California's plan, which will feature trains moving at up to 220 m.p.h. between Sacramento and San Diego.

Vice President Biden lifts Florida's high-speed rail hopes (The following story by Alfonso Chardy and Lesley Clark appeared on the Miami Herald website on June 4, 2009.)

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Vice President Joe Biden suggested Wednesday that Florida stands a good chance of securing some of the \$8 billion the administration has set aside to develop what it calls a "world-class" high-speed passenger rail system.

"Florida is in the mix," Biden told reporters on a conference call. "It is still in play."

Biden outlined two possible Florida routes where high-speed rail could be built and sustained: one from Miami to Tampa via Orlando, the other from Miami to Jacksonville via Orlando.

"They are sustainable, assuming the state wants to get into the game . . . because there's existing systems there and they parallel some of [Interstate] 95," Biden said.

His remarks came as governors and transportation officials from 23 states interested in

securing high-speed rail dollars met at the White House with Biden and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist didn't make the meeting, but Florida Department of Transportation Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos attended. She told Florida lawmakers at a briefing before the White House meeting that state transportation officials are preparing to submit an application for a share of the money.

Rep. Kathy Castor, D-Tampa, said she expects Florida to fare well, noting that President Barack Obama and LaHood have mentioned the state as a potential recipient of the funding.

Castor said the state's bid will require a "unified effort" to compete with other interested states. She said she has sent letters to the congressional delegation asking for support, noting that the project doesn't require state or local matching dollars.

Kopelousos said the state already owns most of the land that would be required for the project—2 0along the proposed 90-mile route between Orlando and Tampa, along Interstate 4.

"We've been looking at doing it, so we're close to being ready," she said. The state estimates it could start construction within two years.

But the state faces fierce competition from other states, not the least from California, which has been planning a high-speed line from Los Angeles to San Francisco for years. California voters have already approved \$9 billion in bond financing to get the project started.

Florida has sought a high-speed rail system since at least the 1970s. In the 1990s, the state came close to building a \$6.3-billion, 200-mph rail line from Miami to Orlando and Tampa. But the project was derailed when then-Gov. Jeb Bush in 1999 refused to spend any additional money on the project.

At the time, bullet-train advocates said a Florida high-speed rail project would compete successfully with regional airlines and Florida's Turnpike.

Members of Florida's congressional delegation Wednesday criticized Tallahassee lawmakers for rejecting funding this spring for Tri-Rail and a proposed commuter rail line in Orlando, saying the move could put federal money in jeopardy.

"I can tell you the rest of the country will clean our clock if we continue to stumble," said Rep. John Mica of Orlando, the top Republican on the House Transportation Committee.

The Legislature this spring rejected a controversial rail line in Central Florida and failed to give Tri-Rail a dedicated source of funding, which Mica says makes it more difficult for lawmakers to make the case in Washington that the state needs transportation dollars.

"You can't do it with a straight face when you're giving back federal dollars," Mica said.

Biden said the federal government is now accepting applications from the states for slices of the \$8 billion, high-speed rail seed money.

The deadline to apply is June 17, and the administration hopes to award money to "shovel-ready projects" later in the summer, Biden said.

A second round of applications would be accepted later for additional money for projects that are not ready to be built.

The administration has identified \$13 billion in federal funds, \$8 billion in the recently enacted stimulus legislation and \$5 billion requested in the federal budget -- to "jump-start" a nationwide high-speed rail system.

Biden said he wants the U.S. system to be comparable to high-speed rail in Europe. He noted that LaHood had recently visited France and Spain to check out their high-speed rail networks.

"We're going to start building a high-speed rail system that will loosen the congestion suffocating our highways and skyways and make travel in this country leaner, meaner and a whole lot cleaner," he said.

Biden -- who as a senator was an enthusiastic commuter aboard Amtrak from his home state, Delaware, to Washington, D.C. -- told the gathering at the White House that he believes a high-speed rail system is "a no-brainer."

"This is how the interstate highway system started, folks," he said. "It wasn't like the Lord on the eighth day said -- 'Boom! There's the interstate highway system.'"

Biden says California high-speed rail project is primed for recovery

funding (The following story by Maeve Reston appeared on the Los Angeles Times website on June 4, 2009.)

LOS ANGELES — Though California is in the throes of a budget crisis, Vice President Joe Biden said Wednesday that the state's high-speed rail project is well-positioned to compete for a significant share of the \$8 billion that the Obama administration set aside in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act for rail lines.

This summer, California officials will be vying against other states to get funding for a planned high-speed rail corridor that would ferry passengers between Los Angeles and San Francisco in a 2-hour, 40-minute trip. Voters approved \$9 billion in bonds for the project in November -- and promoters hope the federal government and the private sector will kick in enough money to help them complete the \$34-billion first phase.

A Construction between Anaheim and San Francisco would take at least a decade, according to planners. Ultimately, proponents envision an 800-mile network -- costing at least \$45 billion -- that would reach Sacramento and San Diego.

"The reason why California is looked at so closely -- it's been a priority of your governor, it's been a priority of your Legislature, they've talked about it, a lot of planning has been done," Biden said in a conference call with reporters.

The vice president said the administration wants "to get shovel-ready projects out the door as quickly as we can. . . . So California is in the game."

Mehdi Morshed, executive director of the California High-Speed Rail Authority, said two sections of the project could meet the Recovery Act criteria for high-speed rail: of having contracts awarded by 2012 and work completed by 2017. The sections would be those between L.A. and Anaheim, at a cost of \$3 billion, and between San Francisco and San Jose,

at a cost of \$4 billion to \$5 billion, he said.

High-speed rail line would include various stops in Va. (The following story by Peter Bacque appeared on the Richmond Times-Dispatch website on June 4, 2009.)

RICHMOND, Va. — The train still is going to run through the Ashland and Staples Mill stations.

The Federal Railroad Administration has dropped consideration of an eastern route for proposed high-speed rail service through Richmond that would have bypassed Ashland and Amtrak's main station on Staples Mill Road in Henrico County.

"We concluded that the eastern route didn't make a whole lot of sense," Charles M. Badger, the director of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, said yesterday.

"It was more expensive and had more environmental impacts. There are some wetlands that the eastern route would have taken," he said. "And it had the trains tie back in north of Ashland, so it would eliminate service to Ashland and even Staples Mill."

During the past year, the state rail agency conducted an environmental study to select the most feasible route between Richmond's Main Street Station and Doswell in northern Hanover County for the U.S. southeast high-speed rail service to Washington.

The eastern route between Main Street Station and Doswell followed the Buckingham Branch rail line, which runs generally east of Interstate 95. The western route follows the CSX rail line, to the west of I-95.

Ashland and Hanover officials opposed the eastern route.

"We're excited that the commonwealth has come to that decision," Hanover County Administrator Cecil R. "Rhu" Harris Jr. said. "We have a very significant stop for Amtrak in Ashland. Continuing that service is very important to the county, the town=2 0and Randolph-Macon College, in particular."

Jennifer Scott with the Hanover Association of Businesses and Chamber of Commerce said, "We're just glad the conversation is still happening about trains coming down that corridor."

"It's really smart that our county leaders and the state government leaders are thinking about the transportation issues now," she said. "We believe that high-speed rail is one of the solutions."

The hometowns of 80 percent of Randolph-Macon students are near the Amtrak line between Richmond and Boston, R-MC President Robert R. Lindgren pointed out.

Ashland officials worried that the loss of passenger train service would slash the income of some of the town's businesses by 20 percent and force others to shut their doors.

Last year, 275,479 travelers used Amtrak's Staples Mill Station, making it Amtrak's busiest station in Virginia, while 16,497 passengers used the Ashland station.

Virginia Gov. Timothy M. Kaine was one of eight governors at the White House yesterday for a roundtable discussion on high-speed rail. Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood challenged governors to think boldly when designing

high-speed rail plans.

Detailed guidance for up to the first \$8 billion in federal rail grant applications will be announced this month, and the first round of grants are expected to be awarded as soon as late summer.

The governor's office also announced yesterday that Virginia has signed an agreement with Amtrak to run an additional train between Richmond and Washington during commuter hours, starting in December. The train and previously announced daily service between Lynchburg and Washington will be the first state-supported intercity passenger rail services in Virginia.

The state will pay Amtrak, the national passenger rail corporation, \$17.2 million to operate the two round-trip trains and \$8 million to rehabilitate the cars and locomotives for the services.

The state rail agency's study found that capital improvements to the eastern route on the Buckingham Branch would have cost \$402 million, considerably more than the \$234 million needed for the existing western line, Badger said.

"The Buckingham Branch has been shown to fail as a reasonable alternative," agreed Mark E. Yachmetz, the Federal Railroad Administration's associate administrator for railroad development.

Now, Badger said, "the commonwealth can move forward with the I-95 corridor development plan to support enhanced passenger and freight rail service."

Biden: High-speed rail money on the way (The following story by Aubrey Cohen appeared on the Seattle Post-Intelligencer website on June 3, 2009.)

SEATTLE, Wash. — Obama administration officials are considering creating a nationwide bond program to fund high-speed rail lines, Vice President Joe Biden said Wednesday.

"We're investigating whether we need a dedicated national capital improvement program, where we have bonds dedicated to high-speed rail," Biden said on a conference call with reporters to discuss high-speed rail.

The \$8 billion Congress allocated for high-speed rail in this year's stimulus package is just a "down payment," he said. "We do know \$8 billion is not going to put in place an entire high-speed rail system in America, but it's 8 billion times more than we had prior to the recovery act. In addition to that we have another \$5 billion we're seeking over the next several years, and we think this can help us jump start a commitment to high-speed rail in the country that can transform and rebalance our transportation network."

The Amtrak Cascades run between Vancouver, B.C., and Eugene, Ore., is one of 10 corridors the federal government has identified for potential high-speed rail projects. The existing Amtrak Acela Express route, between Boston and Washington, D.C., also is eligible for high-speed rail money.

Building true high-speed rail just on Amtrak Cascades "would take up all the (stimulus) money," Biden acknowledged.

He noted that many states, including Washington, have put "skin in the game," allocating money to high-speed rail, and he suggested a national bond program could move the federal share past the down-payment stage.

"We're just beginning this," he said. "Let me remind you, the interstate highway system started the same way."

At a rail forum in Seattle last week, Cascadia Project rail fellow Ray Chambers stressed the importance of finding a dedicated federal funding source for high-speed rail as part of this year's reauthorization of the federal transportation act.

Rail will fail if it depends on fighting with highways for a share of federal gas taxes, he said. "The traditional sources are going to absorb that money and we won't see any of it."

On Wednesday, Biden said the country needs to "rebalance" its transportation spending, noting that highways get "hundreds of billions of dollars a year out of federal revenue."

Biden, a former Delaware senator, has logged, by his count, nearly 8,000 round trips on the Acela Express, which goes as fast as 150 mph.

"This has sort of been a hobbyhorse of mine for the past 25 years," he said, touting high-speed rail as a way to cut congestion and greenhouse-gas emissions, with line construction boosting employment.

While getting European- and Asian-style trains that travel more than 200 mph would require laying down entirely new track lines, improvements to existing lines could increase speeds to 110 mph on routes such as the Amtrak Cascades and the run between Richmond, Va., and Washington, D.C. That could make a big difference on ridership, Biden said, speaking specifically about the Virginia route.

As for that \$8 billion, Biden said officials expect to have all the applications in by June 17 and start awarding money by the end of the summer.

"We want to get shovel-ready projects as quickly as possible that at a minimum significantly enhance ridership and take people off the highways," he said. "The next round will include proposals for comprehensive high-speed programs covering entire corridors or sections of corridors."