

# Deadline Day for Obama's High-Speed Rail Stimulus

By Adriel Bettelheim | August 24, 2009 11:56 AM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

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Monday marked the deadline for states to submit applications for some of the \$8 billion in [high-speed rail funding](#) contained in the economic stimulus package (PL 111-5). You'll recall how the Obama administration and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., muscled the rail money into the financial recovery bill during a House-Senate conference last February, in spite of watchdog groups' concerns that it could benefit construction of a long-planned magnetic-levitation, or "maglev," train connecting Las Vegas, in Reid's home state, and Southern California.

Now, the debate seems to be pivoting around whether the sum is enough to build rail networks of any consequence, and whether high-speed rail will deliver on environmental promises its proponents are promising.

The Obama administration envisions a series of 100-600-mile corridors consisting of upgraded lines and entirely new track that could allow trains to sweep between cities at speeds between 150-250 miles per hour. Amtrak Acela trains operating on the line between Boston and Washington currently have the capability of running at more than 150 miles an hour, but the tracks will not accommodate such speeds.

The technology fits all of Obama's criteria for the recovery -- creating local jobs, helping wean the country off of foreign oil and building 21st century infrastructure. Well, certain types of infrastructure. One of the ideas behind high-speed rail is to relieve crowding on highways and at airports and cut the need for new mega-projects while improving travel times.

"The payoff will be not just faster intercity travel, but also healthier, more vibrant cities for everyone," said Geoff Anderson, president of the advocacy group [Smart Growth America](#).

However, studies suggest the \$8 billion in stimulus funding might not get planners very far. A [Government Accountability Office report](#) earlier this year noted that uncertain ridership forecasts, long lead times and shifting construction costs make high-speed rail projects a dicey financial proposition, and raise questions about whether benefits outweigh the costs.

David Levenson, a University of Minnesota professor of civil engineering and author of [the Transportationist blog](#) is more out front about the perils. The scholar concluded a proposed California high-speed rail line connecting Los Angeles and San Francisco would squander funds, contribute to urban sprawl in the state's Central Valley and create huge technological challenges, because high speed rail has its niche in high density areas with available right-of-way and no intervening mountain ranges. He estimates the total costs of a California high-speed rail segment could total \$80 billion or more.

There are other kinds of costs associated with construction. A Booz Allen Hamilton study of two potential high-speed lines in Britain -- one connecting London and Manchester, the second linking London-Edinburgh and Glasgow -- concluded pollution associated with construction of the systems would offset most of the environmental advantages over air travel. On bottom-line costs, the consulting firm concluded the system's profitability hinges on how many people switch from air to rail.

All of which makes one wonder whether rail proponents and smart growth people can sustain enthusiasm for the high-speed projects once the economy recovers.