

High-speed rail: The long wait for fast trains

by The Editorial Board
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The people who ride passenger trains in this country are by definition a patient bunch. After all, they've long put up with an Amtrak system that measures delays in hours, not minutes.

But Americans have been kept waiting too long already for a better, faster, more modern passenger rail system. President Obama's transportation secretary, Ray LaHood, acknowledged in a recent interview in Portland that it's time, past time, for the United States to get moving on fast trains.

LaHood himself has come some distance on high-speed rail. As a Republican congressman representing downstate Illinois, he dismissed fast trains, saying "People in rural Illinois are not for high-speed rail ... They do not want a train traveling 120, 125, 150 miles per hour through the rural areas, and I support them on that."

Well, LaHood isn't in Peoria anymore. Now he's traveling the country as Obama's transportation chief and as an ambassador for fast trains. LaHood rightly points to the fast, reliable and safe trains blasting along between European and Asian cities, and says this country needs to get to work planning and building the same kind of high-speed system.

Finally, there's real money, real momentum and real national leadership behind fast trains. Obama's stimulus bill included \$8 billion for developing high-speed rail. California voters last year approved \$10 billion for fast trains. Oregon and Washington do not now have much money to chip in for such projects, but the governors of the two states, and other elected officials, notably Rep. Peter DeFazio, a Democrat and chairman of the transportation subcommittee in the House, all are strongly behind high-speed rail.

A new national group, the US High Speed Rail Association, has put on the table a promising plan for a 17,000-mile high-speed rail system that would be built in four phases over the next several decades. It includes a proposed line stretching from Vancouver, British Columbia, south through Seattle, Portland, Eugene, San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Diego. Such a train link would revolutionize travel up and down the West Coast, speeding people between cities, easing the strain on Interstate 5 and other freeways, reducing airline shuttle traffic and slashing fuel consumption and carbon emissions.

It's such an appealing vision that we can't help but feel a growing frustration that it remains so far in the distance. As it stands, the closest thing the United States has to a fast train is the short Acela route that serves the Northeast. Even that train, though, moves much slower than the fast trains in Europe.

When LaHood talked up fast trains in our meeting last week, he promised fast action while simultaneously asking for more patience. He said high-speed rail will come fairly soon to Southern California, where the state is prepared to match federal investments. It will come later to places such as the Pacific Northwest, he said. He likened the future of high-speed rail across the United States to Portland's slow and steady development of its light-rail system, built out over the past 30 years. Thirty years? We hope to see high speed passenger rail service linking Eugene, Portland and Seattle by 2019, a decade from now. It's not like the United States has to invent the technology: France, Britain, Japan, Germany, even Spain, all now have terrific high speed rail lines. Meanwhile, we're still waiting.