

## Obama's High Speed Rail Proposal Gets Thumbs Up

President Barack Obama asked for the states to express their interest in high-speed passenger rail. Interest, he got.

The Obama Administration offers \$8 billion in federal grants for the preliminary stages for high-speed rail.

Forty states and the District of Columbia have submitted notices that they intend to make 278 grant requests to the Federal Railroad Administration this fall; in all, the requests add up to \$102 billion.

"Did you see all the requests?" wondered Brian Weiler, multi-modal operations director for the Missouri Department of Transportation. "Wow!"

So, evidently did Congress. Last week, the U.S. House passed a bill that would add another \$4 billion to high-speed rail programs. The Senate is expected to take up the bill after its recess.

Tom Latham, an Iowa Republican, tried to block the extra money but the U.S. House, including 40 other Republicans, rejected his amendment.

Compared to other states such as California and Florida, which seek billions for high-speed bullet-train-style networks among its biggest cities, Missouri's pre-applications looks a bit dowdy.

Weiler concedes the point.

"It's not high speed," he said. "But it is higher speed."

But the nature of Missouri's pre-application which emphasizes proposals which meet demonstrated needs and are already in the works is a major point in the state's favor, he said.

"I still think we have a good, solid and reasonable application," Weiler said.

The Obama Administration has repeatedly tried to pump as much federal money as possible into the flagging economy.

Administration officials emphasize the phrase "shovel ready," to show their intent to get more money into the economy and create more jobs quickly.

Missouri's pre-application is nothing but "shovel ready," with most of the design work done and projects merely waiting on money, Weiler said.

Missouri's pre-application for high-speed passenger money indicates the state will ask for \$139 million, plus another \$50 million as part of a group of upper Midwest states.

The governors of the eight states in the group say they want to build a network of high-speed trains connecting 12 metropolitan areas with Chicago as the hub.

Kansas is asking for \$17 million, mostly for the preparations for connecting the Heartland Flyer, which runs between Fort Worth, Texas, and Oklahoma City, to the Southwest Chief that runs through Kansas City between Chicago and Los Angeles.

Missouri's pre-application is asking for funding that will be combined with other money for track and other improvements on the Amtrak route between Kansas City's Union Station and St. Louis.

The state, in cooperation with Union Pacific, which owns the track used by Amtrak

trains, is building one passing siding - which allows oncoming trains to go around each other -- at California, Missouri. Weiler said the state seeks money to help pay for a list of track improvements that include safer signals at some highway crossings, two passing tracks at Knob Noster and Kingville, another rail bridge over the Osage River east of Jefferson City, and a "crossover" near Kirkwood, which allows trains to switch tracks.

With the improvements, Amtrak trains would be able to go 90 miles an hour over certain parts of the route -- the present top speed limit is 79 miles an hour.

In conjunction with Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois and Iowa, Missouri has filed a second pre-application for money for new "train sets" -- each train set consists of a locomotive, three passenger cars and a café car.

Each train set is \$25 million. Missouri is asking for two, Weiler said.

"Preferably American made," he added.

Besides increasing passenger train speeds between Kansas City and St. Louis, the track and equipment improvements will help ensure the train service is consistently on-time and reliable, he said.

This year, Amtrak's on-time average on the Missouri route has been 95 percent since January but that hasn't always been that favorable, he said.

"We've had those horror stories of trains stuck on sidings or people showing up early at stations and then waiting three hours before the train shows up," he said. "Hopefully, those days are over."

The pre-applications, which were due earlier this month, merely showed who was planning to apply for the high-speed money and how much.

Depending on the type of request, states have two deadlines to submit final applications, one later this month and the other in October.