

SEATTLE -- In the wake of the Great Recession, the trains that are ridden in the U.S. should be built in the U.S., federal Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said, according to The Seattle Times.

LaHood plans to issue proposals that would require federally funded transit projects to feature domestically built trains, as well as comparable mandates for highways, he said Wednesday in Seattle.

"Our money is going to go to American manufacturers," he said, shortly before speaking at a groundbreaking ceremony for Seattle's Mercer Street rebuild.

How exactly this might play out locally is unclear. Sound Transit in Seattle already is subject to certain "Buy America" rules. Its Kinkisharyo light-rail cars are assembled in Everett, and 60 percent of the value of parts is domestic, according to agency spokesman Bruce Gray.

LaHood said specifically that streetcars ought to be made in Portland, where Oregon Iron Works in 2009 rolled out the first U.S.-built streetcars in 60 years.

Seattle's three South Lake Union streetcars were made in the Czech Republic, but a build-American rule might affect the future First Hill streetcar line. The \$130 million line is to be funded by Sound Transit, but it's possible local sponsors could seek federal grants.

To get an idea of the market size, U.S. agencies in 2008 bought 53 light-rail cars, 555 subway or similar "heavy rail" cars, and 218 commuter-train cars -- and owned about 20,000 rail vehicles total, according to American Public Transportation Association data.

The average light-rail car costs about \$3.4 million, a commuter rail car \$1.8 million.

Sound Transit bought 35 Kinkisharyo cars for its 2009 downtown-to-airport line, and ordered 27 more for its 2016 expansion to Capitol Hill and Husky Stadium, for a total \$246 million.

LaHood announced Aug. 31 that the federal Department of Transportation issued a national design standard and called for long-distance rail cars to be built domestically, as part of President Obama's \$8 billion "high-speed rail" stimulus program.

That directive didn't cover the light-rail networks operated by about two dozen cities, or a proliferating number of streetcar projects.

On Monday, the president announced another \$50 billion would be spent on road, bridge and rail stimulus projects.

When asked on Wednesday, LaHood told the Times that the national transportation-funding plan should require domestic trains.

Same goes for the Federal Transit Administration's New Starts program -- which has delivered \$1.3 billion to Seattle-area Sound Transit lines since 2003.

In the case of high-speed rail, the Amtrak Cascades line is partly funded and managed by the Washington state Department of Transportation, (DOT) which uses the popular Talgo trains from Spain, assembled in South Seattle.

Talgo trains tilt on curves, allowing a smoother ride at the top 79 mph speed than conventional rail cars. There are five Talgos now, and the DOT anticipates needing 15 more trains in the next 20 years.

DOT Secretary Paula Hammond said she thinks Talgo or its competitors will establish manufacturing sites here, to gain a foothold in the new high-speed rail program.

So far, Washington state has been awarded \$590 million to improve its corridors from Seattle to Vancouver, B.C., and Portland.

(The preceding article by Mike Lindblom was published September 8, 2010, by The Seattle Times.)