

GOP Candidates Pledge to Kill High Speed Rail

by Brian Merchant, Brooklyn, New York on 10. 7.10
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As a dreamer of the American high speed rail dream, this news just makes me sad: the Republican candidates running for governor in Ohio, Florida, California, Wisconsin, and elsewhere, have all pledged to kill the rail projects in their states if they're elected. Some are even making such a pledge central to their campaigns. They plan on rejecting the stimulus funding offered to the state -- funding designed to bolster employment -- to stymie high speed rail. And why would they do such a thing? Because it's one of Barack Obama's signature projects, of course, and opposing it is an opportunity to score some political points. Here's more on some gubernatorial candidates' plans to kill high speed rail:

For starters, take a look at what's going on in Wisconsin: (via the NY Times)

In Wisconsin, which got more than \$810 million in federal stimulus money to build a train line between Milwaukee and Madison, Scott Walker, the Milwaukee County executive and Republican candidate for governor, has made his opposition to the project central to his campaign.

Mr. Walker, who worries that the state could be required to spend \$7 million to \$10 million a year to operate the trains once the line is built, started a Web site, NoTrain.com, and has run a television advertisement in which he calls the rail project a boondoggle. "I'm Scott Walker," he says in the advertisement, "and if I'm elected as your next governor, we'll stop this train."

Mr. Walker evidently failed to factor in the relieved burden on the roads, reduced congestion and air pollution, the subsequent health benefits, and the added bonus of employing people during a dragging recession. Other candidates have similar plans of nixing the rail:

In Ohio, the Republican candidate for governor, John Kasich, is vowing to kill a \$400 million federal stimulus project to link Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati by rail. In Florida, Rick Scott, the Republican candidate for governor, has questioned whether the state should invest in the planned rail line from Orlando to Tampa. The state got \$1.25 billion in federal stimulus money for the project, but it will cost at least twice that much to complete.

Obama's plan

The kicker is, the states competed vigorously for the projects just a year ago, and the private sector is also competing in many places to match the funding to complete the projects. But with each of the above candidates for governor either ahead in the polls or still a serious contender, there's a genuine possibility that they could win, make good on their promises, and shut down high speed rail.

The opposition to the project has the Republican Transit Secretary Ray LaHood scratching his head. Yesterday, he tweeted: "Is it just me, or is it hard to argue against writing the next chapter in American innovation?" He also issued a statement that read: "The bottom line is that high-speed rail is a national program that will connect the country, spur economic development and bring manufacturing jobs to the U.S. It will also transform transportation in America; much like the Interstate highway system did under President Eisenhower. It's hard to imagine what would have happened to states like Ohio and Wisconsin if their leaders had decided they didn't want to be connected to the rest of the country back then."

High speed rail would indeed be a great boon to these states, both short term and long term, and help put the nation's transportation sector on a more sustainable trajectory -- it's a shame that cynical, anti-incumbent politics is grinding the dream to a halt.