

GOP Governor Candidates Would Block High Speed Rail

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."

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.

And the nation's most ambitious high-speed rail project, **California's** \$45 billion plan to link Los Angeles and San Francisco with trains that would go up to 220 miles per hour, could be delayed if Meg Whitman, a Republican, is elected governor.

"In the face of the state's current fiscal crisis, Meg doesn't believe we can afford the costs associated with new high-speed rail at this time," said Tucker Bounds, a campaign spokesman.

Ms. Whitman's desire to delay the project, which has already received \$2.25 billion in stimulus money, drew a rebuke from the administration of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican who champions high-speed rail. "To say 'now is not the time' shows a very narrow vision," said Matt David, the governor's communications director.

The state-level opposition is a reminder of the challenge of building a national transportation project in the United States: while the federal government can set priorities, the construction is up to the states.

With recent polls showing all of the anti-rail Republican candidates leading or within striking distance of their pro-rail Democratic rivals, it is possible they could be elected and try to stop the train projects.

Federal officials, meanwhile, are incredulous that candidates are threatening to spurn stimulus money that their states competed ferociously to win just a year ago.

"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.," Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, a former Republican congressman, said in a statement.

"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."

Several candidates said they wanted to spend the stimulus rail money on roads and bridges, but it is unlikely they would be able to do so without changing the law: the stimulus, which included \$28 billion for roads and bridges, required that the \$8 billion for rail projects be spent on rail projects.

Federal officials declined to speculate on what would happen if anti-rail candidates were to win. But states that turn down rail money would probably have to return it to the federal government, which could then award it to states that want it.

Building a real high-speed rail network, like the ones expanding in Europe and Asia, is costly. The Acela trains between Boston and Washington can reach 150 m.p.h., but average around half that on their curvy, busy tracks.

That corridor, the most heavily used in the country, was largely shut out of the stimulus money; last week Amtrak outlined a \$117 billion proposal to make it a true high-speed line.

The Obama administration used the rail stimulus money to make down payments on the high-speed lines in Florida and California and to build conventional rail service in other states.

The administration's hope is that these rail lines will develop into networks that connect more cities, and that future investment can speed the trains. But critics question who will ride the new, not very fast trains.

The train proposed in Ohio would reach only 79 m.p.h. Estimates have suggested that some trips, with stops factored in, could average 39 m.p.h. Federal officials say the trains would be faster, but the number has stuck: in a recent debate Mr. Kasich, the Republican candidate, vowed that if he is elected governor, "the 39 mile-an-hour high-speed passenger train is dead."

Gov. Ted Strickland, a Democrat seeking re-election, looked flabbergasted that anyone would turn down a \$400 million construction project, fully financed by the federal government, to link the state's biggest cities. "Your position, quite frankly, really puzzles me," he responded at the debate.

Mr. Walker, the candidate in Wisconsin, said in an interview that he doubted many people would ride the train between Milwaukee and Madison. He said that it would be more expensive than a car trip without saving much time, and added that he worried about having to provide an annual subsidy to run the train.

In Florida, Bettina Inclán, a spokeswoman for Mr. Scott, the Republican candidate, noted that the state already paid to operate a commuter rail system and added that "we cannot afford to be subsidizing the bullet train as well."

All Republicans are not against trains. One prominent rail advocate, John Robert Smith, was a four-term Republican mayor of Meridian, Miss.

"Any notion that somehow rail is subsidized, and other modes of transportation aren't, is simply not factual," said Mr. Smith, the president Reconnecting America, a nonprofit transportation advocacy group, who noted that highways and airports were subsidized as well.

"Honestly, transportation infrastructure should not be a partisan issue. When you talk about good transportation solutions, they cross party lines."

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