

Democrats Oppose Mica's Plan to Shelve Nationwide High-Speed Rail

By Nathan Hurst, CQ Staff

Democrats on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee lashed out Thursday at Chairman [John L. Mica](#)'s call to refocus passenger rail funding on the popular, heavily traveled Northeast Corridor, reiterating their support for the Obama administration's vision for a nationwide high-speed rail program.

"I'm glad this committee wasn't in charge when the Eisenhower Interstate System was developed," Rep. [Corrine Brown](#), D-Fla., said at the panel's hearing on California's plan to connect Los Angeles with San Francisco via a high-speed rail line. "We'd be a third-world country, too."

The hearing follows a recent session at which rank-and-file Republicans lined up behind Mica, R-Fla., and his assertion that the federal government should dedicate its efforts and dollars to the corridor linking Boston to Washington, where federally subsidized Amtrak runs its most consistently profitable trains.

California's plan has been widely panned by critics as a potential boondoggle, after the state's high-speed rail authority released a plan earlier this year that projected costs would soar toward the \$100 billion mark and the project would take nearly double the original time estimate.

Most irking to congressional Republicans — who zeroed out funding for President Obama's national high-speed rail program in the "minibus" appropriations law enacted last month ([PL 112-55](#)) — is the plan's assumption of more than \$40 billion in federal money to complete the project.

Committee Democrats fought back Thursday, criticizing Mica's inability so far to advance long-term authorizations of surface transportation and aviation programs, both currently operating under a short-term extension ([PL 112-30](#)).

"It's like a never-ending reality show," said [Nick J. Rahall II](#) of West Virginia, the panel's top Democrat.

California Democrat [Dennis Cardoza](#) criticized as "short-sighted" the Republican calls to shelve the high-speed rail project.

"We have to build things in America," he said.

Joseph Szabo, head of the Federal Railroad Administration, suggested that the panel's own contentiousness is contributing to rising project costs, especially regarding the California plan.

"If you want to build it faster, if you want to build it cheaper, you can do that," Szabo told the committee. But he said the biggest uncertainty driving up costs is "congressional gridlock."

Transportation Secretary [Ray LaHood](#) said the House GOP's opposition would not deter the Obama administration from funding rail projects, which he said remained a top White House priority despite recent legislative setbacks.

"We're not going to be dissuaded by a few detractors who fail to see the value in high-speed rail," LaHood said.