

What if high speed rail isn't really dead?

If Obama wins another round of financing, here's what Washington should do differently



An Amtrak Lincoln Service train flies south at 79 mph from Atlanta, Ill., on Nov. 27, 2010. Work progresses here with new rail and concrete ties to raise passenger train speeds to 110 mph. Steve Smedley

In the March issue, I wrote the obituary of Barack Obama's sponsorship of high speed passenger rail. So much had gone wrong. There's no money. Expectations were overblown. Grants went helter-skelter. The public never bought in. Money was spread too thin. The regulators implementing grants treated freight railroads as opponents, not partners. The only high speed line in America, Amtrak's Northeast Corridor, was initially ignored.

Barack Obama never read my column (no surprise there). Instead, he doubled down, proposing to follow the first \$10 billion in high speed rail grants with \$53 billion more over the next six years. Conventional wisdom is that this proposal died at birth. But maybe it didn't. Democrats still control the U.S. Senate, and whatever budget Congress adopts for fiscal 2012 (which begins Oct. 1) must bear the president's signature. So if Obama is really serious about high speed rail, and is willing to go to the mat to save his program, he may get at least some of what he wants.

If Obama does get a second chance, what should he do differently to ensure a better outcome and build momentum? Here are my eight ideas.

Don't overpromise. Most of the grants to date aren't about high speed rail. Instead, they build more capacity (I call it muscle) into existing 79-mph or slower passenger routes. This is long overdue, but overpromising opens the program to ridicule by political opponents and feeds public cynicism. Plus, it confuses people. President Obama and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood need to practice truth in labeling.

Give us a plan. All we've gotten are political sound bites. The closest I've seen to vision is Amtrak's proposal to redo the Northeast Corridor, but at a cost (\$117 billion) that makes people faint. What's the president's vision? So far, because of the way money is distributed, state governments have to supply the vision. Is there a better way? Here's one plan, in just 32 words: Instead of promising people 200-mph bullet trains, fix the passenger train network we already have. Get people used to riding trains again. Build a political constituency in favor of passenger rail. California's Department of Transportation did this, at some cost but with great success.

Concentrate the bets. In Round 1, LaHood tried to please all 100 senators by tossing every state a bone, often just "study money." If there is a Round 2, pick only a few deserving corridors or themes and fully fund them.

Fix the Northeast Corridor. Boston to Washington is high speed rail in America, and it needs improving, so start there. Rebuild through Baltimore, avoiding tight curves and time-sapping tunnels. Finish the installation of high-tension catenary south of New York City, enabling 160-mph Acela speeds. I asked Al Engel, Amtrak's vice president of high speed rail, what he would do with a \$2 billion grant. He shot back that he'd invest it in two additional main tracks between Newark, N.J., and the Hudson River and a new elevated bridge over the Hackensack River at Secaucus. OK, there you go.

Extend the Northeast Corridor. Amtrak keeps adding conventional trains south of Washington, D.C., which quickly fill up. Build on that. Resurrect the abandoned Seaboard Air Line route from south of Petersburg, Va., to north of Raleigh, N.C.

Lubricate Chicago. Begin by finishing CREATE, the decade-old effort to untangle the rail lines in that city. Use abandoned rail lines to stitch together a new way to get from Porter, Ind., on the east edge of the metropolitan area, to Chicago Union Station; the existing Norfolk Southern route will never satisfy both NS and Amtrak, which now runs seven trains each way a day across there. Bring Chicago to Joliet, Ill., owned by Canadian National, into the 110-mph corridor to St. Louis.

Start over in California. That state's high speed rail authority, which talks of building from San Francisco to San Diego, got almost \$4 billion of the \$10 billion in federal grants. The project has the look of a disaster — a handful of employees (19 at last word) directing an army of clueless consultants providing the equivalent of 604 fulltime positions, with no oversight from the state government. The Legislative Analyst's Office, California's version of Washington's Government Accountability Office, issued a devastating report in May. Among its findings: Based on the latest cost estimates for building the first 100-mile segment, the total project's cost, last estimated at \$43 billion, could be double that. The federal government should quit chasing this mirage and fund a more limited high speed objective in that crowded state.

Don't mix oil and water. Between Chicago (Joliet, actually) and St. Louis, Union Pacific and Illinois are building infrastructure to permit passenger trains to move across a freight railroad about as fast as they should go, or 110 mph. It's costly (\$4.4 billion), and I hope the work gets done. But don't expect other freight railroads to agree to future projects that take bites out of their capacity or involve higher-than-normal speeds. If you want truly high speed trains, start from scratch and leave the freight railroads alone to do what they do best.

Most people in the rail industry I talk to share the common belief that the federal grants we've seen so far for high speed rail represent all we'll ever see. They're probably right. But if the president manages to break through the wall of opposition to his \$53 billion initiative and gets it going, his people must do a better job executing the plan than they did in Round 1. Otherwise, he just hurts the greater cause. **I**

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