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April 12, 2011

Budget Deal Deeply Cuts High-Speed Rail Program

By MICHAEL COOPER

President Obama's fledgling [high-speed rail](#) program was dealt a serious setback by the budget deal that he struck with Republicans last week: new details released Tuesday showed that the agreement will not only eliminate financing for high-speed rail this year, but will also take back some of the money that Congress approved for it last year.

The cut is a major blow to one of Mr. Obama's signature transportation goals, which he set just months ago in his [State of the Union address](#) when he called for giving 80 percent of Americans access to high-speed rail within 25 years. And it casts serious doubt on his proposal for spending \$53 billion on a high-speed rail program over the next six years.

The cuts will not bring the rail program to a halt, as there is still unspent rail money that can be used on new projects. But they leave the future of high-speed rail in the United States unclear, to say the least. Roughly \$10 billion has been approved for high-speed rail so far, but that money has been spread to dozens of projects around the country. If Congress does not approve more money, it is possible that the net result of all that spending will be better regular train service in many areas, and a small down payment on one bullet train, in California.

This year, newly elected Republican governors in Florida, Ohio and Wisconsin **decided to reject** billions of dollars in federal rail money that their predecessors had sought and won, arguing that the projects would be costly boondoggles. **Florida spurned** \$2.4 billion that would have nearly paid for the nation's first high-speed train, connecting Tampa and Orlando.

The depth of the cut in the budget deal came as something of a surprise. As late as Monday afternoon, an administration official had said that there would still be \$1 billion available for high-speed rail this year — a cut from the \$2.5 billion in last year's budget, and the \$8 billion in rail money in the stimulus bill that got the program started.

But when the **budget bill was released** overnight, that money was gone: "Notwithstanding Section 1101, the level for 'Department of Transportation, **Federal Railroad Administration**, Capital Assistance for High Speed Rail Corridors and Intercity Passenger Rail Service' shall be \$0." Another section of the new budget bill called for taking back \$400 million of the \$2.5 billion that was approved last year.

The trims — coupled with cuts to transit spending — were denounced by transportation advocates. "With gas prices in many parts of the country topping \$4 a gallon, now is not the time to choke off funding for high-speed rail and transit, which saves oil and provides travelers with a more efficient and convenient alternative to sitting in traffic on America's increasingly crowded roadways," said Dan Smith, who follows federal transportation issues for the U.S. Public Interest Research Group.

But the cuts were cheered by many Republicans, who have questioned the program all along. Gov. **Rick Scott** of Florida, a Republican with **Tea Party** support who canceled the Tampa-to-Orlando line, **issued a news release** on Monday celebrating premature reports that the high-speed rail program would be cut by \$1.5 billion (it was ultimately cut by \$2.9 billion).

Under the headline "Governor Rick Scott Helps Avoid Government Shutdown and Save Federal Taxpayers \$1.5 Billion," it began, "This weekend as Washington, D.C., insiders struggled to find billions to prevent a government shutdown, they found \$1.5 billion worth of taxpayer money exactly where Governor Rick Scott left it: in the boondoggle high-speed rail proposal."

But if some states have rejected the money, others are still clamoring for it: 24 states, the District of Columbia and [Amtrak](#) have applied for the money that Florida turned down.



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