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Midterms Threaten Obama's Rail Plans

By MICHAEL COOPER

The Obama administration's signature transportation initiative is almost always described as "high-speed rail." But more than half of the \$10.4 billion the administration has awarded for rail so far has not gone toward real bullet trains, but to build slower, conventional train lines that it hopes will form the foundation of a nationwide high-speed rail network.

Now, though, that strategy is being tested by this month's midterm election results, which have halted a couple of the administration's biggest train projects.

Work on a pair of conventional rail lines in the Midwest is grinding to a stop now that Ohio and Wisconsin have elected Republican governors who are threatening to spurn \$1.2 billion in federal rail money that their Democratic predecessors had sought and won. The governors-elect are concerned that the new trains will not be fast enough or transformative enough to convert their state's drivers into paying railroad passengers.

"That train is dead," [John Kasich](#) declared after he was elected governor of Ohio, following through on a campaign pledge to halt a \$400 million federal project linking Cincinnati, Cleveland and Columbus with trains that would go less than 50 miles per hour. He said he feared they would be too costly for the state to run.

And the Republican takeover of the House could have ramifications for the administration's rail program as well. The incoming chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Representative John L. Mica of Florida, supports high-speed rail but has a different vision: A report he co-wrote last month called for "reprogramming funds that were awarded to states for slow-speed passenger rail projects to true high-speed projects that can attract private sector participation and run at an operational profit."

The question now is how much pizzazz will be needed to sell a rail-averse nation, and some of its increasingly rail-averse elected officials, on a future with bullet trains that can rocket at speeds of more than 150 m.p.h., pulled by sleek Jetsons-style locomotives?

Or will building more lines with decent, dependable service, which many transportation advocates say will provide more bang for the buck, be sufficient to get people in the habit of riding the rails again?

Transportation Secretary **Ray LaHood**, a former Republican congressman from Illinois who is now the Obama administration's biggest booster of passenger rail, said there was no shortage of worthy rail projects that other states wanted to build. He added that he was preparing to give some of them the money that Ohio and Wisconsin were now **threatening to give up**.

And at a high-speed rail conference this week in New York, he made it clear that he still favored the more incremental approach of building a nationwide rail network in stages.

"The train has left the station," Mr. LaHood proclaimed. "High-speed rail is coming to America."

But the debates over high-speed rail have highlighted the difficulties in building major transportation projects in America under its current brand of federalism.

President Obama and the Democratic-led Congress agreed that the time had come for high-speed rail, and they included **\$8 billion** in the stimulus act and another \$2.4 billion after that to jump-start the effort. Although the federal government has the vision and the money, it is up to states to build the projects.

So states submitted nearly 400 applications for rail projects, and federal rail transportation officials chose the ones they thought had the best chance of success. The states and the federal government began to haggle with the nation's freight railroad companies, which own most of the nation's track. Then elections brought new state officials, some of whom are saying thanks, but no thanks.

Just last month, Gov. [Chris Christie](#) of New Jersey, a Republican, [killed a long-planned commuter train tunnel](#) under the Hudson River that had received pledges of \$3 billion from the federal government. He cited concerns about the strapped state's share of the project's rising costs.

Karen Rae, the deputy administrator of the [Federal Railroad Administration](#), said at this week's conference that the nation needed to build a viable train network of feeder lines before high-speed rail would make sense in many places. She also noted the structural difficulties.

"Everyone likes to compare us to Europe, and to Asia, and to Japan and China, and how come we can't do that?" Ms. Rae said. "First of all, I always like to say, when I look at Europe, we're more like the [European Union](#) in our role at the F.R.A. than we are like Spain or France, which are much more like our states — they have independent governance structures, they have independent decision-making."

The federal government chose to finance only two true high-speed train routes: California got around \$3 billion for its plan to connect Los Angeles and San Francisco with trains that can go up to 220 m.p.h., a project that is expected to cost more than \$45 billion. And Florida got around \$2 billion, almost enough to pay for a high-speed line between Orlando and Tampa.

But now Florida's governor-elect, [Rick Scott](#), a Republican, is taking another look at the numbers to see if the train will be viable: at only 84 miles, the route is not considered long enough by many rail experts to be optimally served by high-speed rail.

And neither Orlando nor Tampa has much of a transit system — this month voters in Hillsborough County, the home of Tampa, voted against raising taxes to build a commuter transit system. So many

of the rail riders would end up **needing cars** when they reach their destinations anyway.

The most successful rail corridor in the nation — the Northeast corridor, which links the densely populated, transit-friendly cities of Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Washington — has been largely shut out of the high-speed rail money.

Amtrak's Acela trains can go up to 150 m.p.h., but average around half of that because they share their curvy tracks with many other trains. This fall, Amtrak unveiled a \$117 billion proposal to make it a true high-speed line, but no one knows where the money will come from.

At the rail conference, Mr. LaHood, the transportation secretary, spoke of spending \$500 billion over the next 25 years to connect 80 percent of the country with rail. Then, although the conference was in a hotel across the street from Pennsylvania Station, where Amtrak trains leave all day for Washington, Mr. LaHood left for the airport.

His schedulers had booked him a flight back to Washington.



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