

High Speed Rail Fever – Part One

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Volume I, No. 9

May 15, 2009

A year ago no one could have possibly foreseen the sudden emergence of such widespread interest in High Speed Rail ("HSR"), nor imagined the apparent intensity of popular enthusiasm regarding the potential of extensive HSR development in America. Here in Virginia, HSR is being promoted by at least one would-be gubernatorial aspirant.

To President Barack Obama goes the credit. Not to be overlooked, however, was the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 ("PRIIA"), signed last fall by George W. Bush, which effectively put an end to thirty-seven years of debate over the role of intercity passenger rail in the U.S. It now appears that Amtrak is here to stay, and that intercity passenger rail is destined to be improved and expanded over the next two decades, with or without High Speed Rail.

Beyond that, little is yet known about how we get from here to there. Neither the U. S. D.O.T., nor the Federal Railroad Administration, nor most of the state rail planning and development agencies, were ready for the challenge of having to prudently and effectively invest \$ 8 billion, and possibly more, as result of Obama's signature rail item in the February, 2009 "Stimulus" Act. Unlike the federal-state funding and development relationship in highway construction, which has been evolving for almost 100 years, nothing of the sort yet exists for large-scale rail development. Good people, able people, with the best of intentions, are scrambling as this is written to put in place guidelines and the mechanism for public investment in HSR. This is a huge challenge for all concerned.

One potential obstacle to rapid deployment of federal funds for rail will be the half-dozen large freight railroads which own and control most of the route system in the nation. None of these railroads is really enthusiastic about the prospects of HSR. Some of them are still doubtful of the wisdom of being a party to any funding plans which bring greater government oversight and possible control. They can be very innovative, or maddeningly obstructionists. It all depends on whether they are for something, or against it. The DNA in the freight rail culture is decidedly negative to any expanded role of government; has been for a century, since Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

The freight railroads have many very legitimate concerns. Yet rail spokespersons occasionally give the impression that they are indifferent and insensitive to public will. Government affairs lieutenants of the big four freights recently lectured a Washington audience on their "principles," which if strictly observed could stymie most traditional passenger rail improvement projects; projects two steps below the level of international HSR to which President Obama apparently aspires.

The sooner the President invites the rail chiefs to the White House the better. It might also be revealing and beneficial to them if they traveled incognito to DC, as regular Amtrak passengers, and without their own operating officials being aware of their travel plans.

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