

TITLE: Fast Forward

Can high-speed rail take Oregon to the future on time?

By Peter Wendolkowski

It's a February morning sometime in the near future, and you wake up consumed with the usual quotidian worries, compounded by a vague sense of seasonal gloom. There is a bright spot though. Today is the first day you will ride the new Cascadia HS (high speed) service to a meeting in Seattle. As the cab drops you off at Union Station, you are inordinately cheered up by the bright neon "Go By Train" sign.

The sign rings true now more than ever, you think. While the old service was nice and comfortable, the two-hour-and-45-minute travel time barely beat driving most days and just didn't cut it for morning meetings. (What other kind are there?)

Arriving at the platform, you admire the sleek fourth generation TGV clone. Settling into a leather business-class recliner, you also relish the fact that these train sets are cutting edge, with some definite improvements over the California HS put into service two years ago. About eight minutes into the voyage, as you clatter across the Columbia, you realize with a smile that you will barely be able to scan the day's headlines and drink a latte before pulling into King Street Station in less than an hour. As your train switches onto the high-speed concrete slab track, you are momentarily startled by the quick acceleration, but quickly become jaded as the train hits its maximum speed of 199 mph. As you speed by the cars and trucks on adjacent I-5, your eyes close in contentment — the headlines and coffee can wait.

Nothing unusual about the above fantasy; it's a scenario that's been played out in the popular press for 20 or more years. Why can't we have the same high speed comfortable trains that business and leisure travelers enjoy in Europe and Asia?

With the partial exception of the U.S. Northeast Corridor (Boston to Washington, D.C.), North America has been immune to high speed fever. It's a march that started in Japan and France, but now has spread to England, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Taiwan, Korea, and China. The high-speed rail banner is even being picked up here on the Monroe Doctrine side of the waters with both Argentina and Brazil in talks to finance their first starter lines. Both Spain's new line from Madrid to Barcelona and the new Paris to Strasbourg (LGV-Est) line upped their speeds this year from 186 to 199 mph.

One-hundred ninety-nine miles per hour! Tell that to the folks in the snazzy Amtrak Cascades bistro car stuck behind a freight train trundling into Eugene at less than 30 mph. Already quite a few readers might be thinking, "Okay, but ... but you can't ... but it's too ... but we don't have ..."

There is a standard set of reasons trotted out for America's minority opinion on the issue of high-speed rail. It's easy to categorize them as beating a dead iron horse. The anti-high-speed rail argument is often just a stanza in the general transportation status quo

(roads and air) hymn, but it does have some of its own flavor. Some of these may strike you as familiar: 1. Trains are old and antiquated. 2. Nobody rides 'em. 3. This is America; we're a big country — too spread out for trains. 4. Cars and planes work just fine, thanks. 5. What's that coming down the track? Creeping Socialism?

All right, on the last issue of public funding, maybe the pundits have a point. Large infrastructure projects are expensive and will never be built entirely through free market incentive. But it seems that these same solons turn a blind eye to massive spending for airports and highways, whether based on the gas tax (world's biggest regressive tax masquerading as a user fee) or on general funds.

Trains in America are like a dog that's given just enough food to live, and then you wonder why the old fella doesn't have any get up and go. Is Amtrak old and antiquated compared to most of the first world? Sure, but that's what you get on a subsistence diet. In fact, by carrying close to 26 million passengers last year, Amtrak is doing a remarkable job providing basic transportation as well as a premium product in some parts of the country, namely the Northeast Corridor, California and the Pacific Northwest (don't laugh). Amtrak has perfected a 37-year balancing act of getting the taxpayer to commit a relatively small annual sum to run what is basically the Boston to Washington, D.C., corridor and a sketchy national system.

There isn't any question that if we had the kind of rail systems prevalent in the rest of the developed world, nobody would be pulling the "trains as dinosaurs" argument. Amtrak, by maintaining the national long distance network at the behest of Congress, contributes to the fiction of a spread out U.S. of A. Sure, a 49-hour journey between Chicago and L.A. is not going to get Hollywood stars back on the Super Chief.

A better way of looking at the big picture is to enumerate the city pairs 300 to 500 miles apart that are natural candidates for medium to high-speed rail connections. At these distances, the train starts to pick up business from airlines — up to 50 percent of the combined traffic at three hours of travel time — and with each incremental savings the rail share rockets up while the air share plunges. For the French TGV line that recently opened from Paris to Strasbourg, all domestic air traffic between the two points has been grounded.

In this post-Sept. 11 world, it's hard to justify the expense in runway expansion, fuel costs, and time wasted in security lines for these short hop flights that could be replaced with high-speed rail. As for freeways, the expansion of the existing network to accommodate future traffic would entail unacceptable costs in terms of land use, environmental degradation and fuel expenditure.

These are realities often overlooked in the conservative take on transportation issues, which tends to favor road building, mainly because our prevalent suburban culture is extremely car dependent. Some libertarians, perhaps realizing that our national freeway binge was just another form of social meddling, are now shouting "stop" and advocating a more freedom-friendly approach of toll highways and even congestion pricing. Are they

taking a page from “Red” Ken Livingstone, former mayor of London, who implemented the first successful urban anti-auto zone? It’s humorous when avowed objectivists and Stalinists are caught holding hands behind their backs, and it points out the absurdity of most pay-as-you-go transportation models.

Not only will Americans instinctively reject a rationing scheme, but resentment will build over highways constructed using public monies and government eminent domain, which are then conveniently turned over to multinational consortia to turn profits over “Lexus lanes.” The common weal always benefits from national scale investments in transportation, whether it is the old National Highway system, the first transcontinental railroad, or Eisenhower’s interstates. It’s time to move to the next phase, real high-speed rail.

Signs of sanity

While it’s not true high speed, Amtrak’s Acela, running between our nation’s capital and Boston on the electrified Northeast Corridor, is a great example of the transportation revolution we’re talking about. After experiencing some technical glitches in the first years of the new century, this high-stepper is now taking the lion’s share of the air/rail traffic between Washington, D.C., and New York. Despite the lack of true high-speed track, the amenities and comfort of the new service (meals in first class, leather seats, Wi-Fi) ensure that movers and shakers are spotted on the Acela, not on the Air Shuttle (glamour transport back in the pre-Sept. 11 world).

Can this success be exported to the rest of the country? Few people, even so-called transportation experts, know some of the reasons the Northeast Corridor is a special case, aside from the large population centers involved. The rail stretch between New York and Washington, D.C., was electrified way back in the 1930s by the Pennsylvania Railroad with federal aid during the Great Depression. In the post-war years, when Europe and Japan took up the electrification on a massive scale, we didn’t, due to the low cost of diesel fuel. In the 1960s, Lyndon Johnson’s Department of Transportation (DOT) sponsored the first high-speed train in America, the Metroliner, which could reach 160 mph on then Penn Central’s less than perfect rail. Again, from 1976-1981, the Federal government sponsored the Northeast Corridor Improvement Project, a multi-billion-dollar project entirely separate from Amtrak. The final push in the federal effort came during the late 1990s, when the northern end of the corridor, from New Haven to Boston, was finally electrified in preparation for the Acela debut.

What this all means is that the Northeast corridor has been the recipient of 70 years of private and federal largesse, creating a very different railroad from the mostly single-tracked diesel freight lines that blanket the rest of the country. As my German cousin said with raised eyebrows when riding the Acela, “This actually feels like a real train.”

And Acela increased its dominance in this crowded market, with 3,191,321 riders in 2007, an almost 20 percent gain from the previous year.

Other parts of the country perhaps offer a better example of what can be achieved with an incremental investment. The state of Illinois took a gamble on increasing the state payment to Amtrak from \$12-24 million per year. Results? The corridor from Chicago to St. Louis — with enhanced frequencies but no change in speed or amenities — saw ridership grow to 408,807 last year, an increase of 56 percent. It's not high speed, but these additional half-million riders will be among the folks clamoring for, and voting for those who promise, higher speeds and more choices in travel.

The three main California corridors (San Luis Obispo to San Diego, Oakland/Sacramento to Bakersfield, and Sacramento to San Jose) brought a total of almost 5 million inter-city train riders last year in our most auto-friendly state. California citizens bit the bullet on passing bond issues that have equipped these routes with some of the most modern cars in North America, as well as increased frequency, speed and comfort.

As an example, the rails between San Jose and Sacramento hosted only one passenger train daily in 1991. A quarter century later, over one and a half million annual passengers get to choose between 16 trains daily, an almost commuter level of service.

Aside from a few good news stories at the state level, including the Cascades service in the Pacific Northwest, any efforts at a national reevaluation of passenger and high-speed rail has been stymied by a pro-automobile administration and federal DOT bureaucracy. There are signs that this era of benign neglect is at a close. The Senate and the House have passed the first comprehensive Amtrak authorization legislation in over a decade. The legislation includes substantive outlays in yearly capital support for the national passenger railroad (to about \$2 billion per year). But perhaps more importantly, the legislation matches federal with state dollars for incremental and high-speed passenger rail improvements. This is the first time that the federal matching principle, long accepted for roads and transit, could be applied to intercity routes.

This new authorization bill represents just the first step in repairing and renewing this country's infrastructure. That's according to the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission who say so in their groundbreaking final report from December 2007. While no one should try to memorize the commission's name, or even to attempt to concoct a Washington, D.C.-style acronym, what the commission says bears listening to. This bipartisan body — eight Republicans and four Democrats, including the U.S. Secretary of Transportation, experts and industry leaders — recommends spending \$357 billion over the next 50 years to rebuild our passenger rail network. And, sorry folks, most of this is to maintain and start up good, moderate speed services in vital corridors to take the pressure off overstressed freeways and airways, not glamorous European/Asian-style high-speed rail. Where, then, can we turn for the first true high-speed service in the United States?

Hasta la vista, congestion?

While the Governor is something of a last minute convert to the high-speed cause, a quick visit to the California High Speed web page, www.cahighspeedrail.ca.gov, will find

California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's smiling mug front and center. The slick web page, with entertaining simulations of trains gliding from Los Angeles to the Bay Area in two and a half hours, belies the hard work the High-Speed Rail Authority has accomplished in its decade of existence. Originally conceived in the hope that Californians would buy into that most un-American principle of long-range planning, the commission has since built political and grassroots support for high-speed rail, completed preliminary engineering, compiled the necessary voluminous Environmental Impact statements, and attracted the rapt attention of the worldwide rail industry builders, suppliers and operators. It's like a freeze-dried system — just add money and watch her go.

The proposed bond issue for almost \$10 billion represents less than a quarter of the costs of the initial system and has been pushed back from voter consideration since 2004. In 2008, however, the stars are aligning to make passage more likely. As noted, Gov. Schwarzenegger is now counted as a supporter, and federal legislation is pending that would help match the state's stake in this project. There is a strong likelihood that this combination can also attract considerable private funding because dedicated high-speed lines overseas often run in the black.

The most compelling reason to vote for this high-speed rail issue is a look at the costs of *not* building it. With 13.5 million additional people expected to reside in California within 20 years, supporting those residents would require at least \$82 billion in upgrades, including 2,970 additional miles of freeway lanes, 90 new airport gates, and five new runways. Short of living in an Al Gore de-industrialized agrarian utopia, we will have to pay the mobility piper in some form, and high-speed rail will prove to be one of the most cost-efficient methods. This has been proven throughout the world, and California will lead the way at home.

And as to the fantasy rumination at the beginning of this article, don't try going down to the station until about 2016 — we don't want to let your latte get cold.

Peter Wendolkowski is program manager for a large environmental protection agency contract in Washington, D.C.