



High-Speed Rail Key Facts

High-speed rail has been touted as a clean, low-cost alternative to congested roads. A closer look at the facts shows otherwise.

In “Taking Illinoisans for a Ride: The False Promises of High-Speed Rail,” transit expert Randal O’Toole explains how the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) is preparing to kick-start the construction of a high-speed rail network with federal “stimulus” dollars. O’Toole notes that the FRA has no estimate of how much high-speed rail will ultimately cost, who will ride it, who will pay for it, and whether the benefits can justify the costs.

A realistic review shows that high-speed rail will be extremely costly and will add little to American mobility or environmental quality.

Cost

- The best available data indicate that the FRA plan will cost about \$90 billion (\$1,000 for each federal income taxpayer).

- Illinois’s portion of the FRA plan, plus proposed lines to Rock Island, Quincy, and Carbondale, will cost \$3.6 billion, or \$280 for every resident—plus tens of millions in annual operating subsidies.

- This money won’t buy super-fast bullet trains. In Illinois, the top speed of Amtrak trains will be boosted from 79 mph to 110 mph (meaning average speeds of 60 mph to 75 mph). Trains ran that fast 70 years ago.

Ridership

- The average Illinoisan will take a round trip on high-speed trains only once every 9 years. For every Illinoisan riding high-speed rail once a month, over 100 residents will never ride it.

- Analysis of travel patterns shows that the average American will ride these trains less than 60 miles per year, or about 1/70th as much as the average American travels on interstate freeways.

- Because of a premium fare structure and downtown orientation, the main patrons of high-speed trains will be well-paid downtown workers whose employers pay the fare.

Energy and Environment

- High and moderate-speed trains are likely to do more harm to the environment than good. According to the Department of Energy, in intercity travel automobiles are already as energy-efficient as Amtrak, and the energy efficiencies of both autos and airliners are growing faster than trains.

- The energy cost of constructing new high-speed rail lines will dwarf any operational savings. As the state of Florida concluded in 2005, “the environmentally preferred alternative is the No Build Alternative.”

Traffic

- Given low ridership relative to Illinois’s highway traffic, moderate-speed trains will do little to relieve traffic congestion.

- Even California, which is proposing true high-speed trains, projects that its trains will only reduce traffic by an average of just 3.8 percent.

- Traffic congestion wastes nearly 3 billion gallons of fuel each year. Traffic signal coordination—in San Jose, this cost \$500,000 and saves an estimated 471,000 gallons of gasoline each year—and other low-cost techniques can do more to relieve congestion and save energy than high-speed rail, and at a far lower cost.

Land Usage

- High-speed rail is part of the Obama Administration’s “livability” campaign to reshape the lifestyles of average Americans.

- Under Federal Transit Administration policies, urban areas with strong “transit supportive land-use policies” (i.e. high population densities), are more likely to receive federal funds.

- Surveys show that most Americans want to live in single-family homes with a yard. However, “livability” policies deliberately make this housing unaffordable to low and middle-income families in urban areas.

Illinois should use its share of rail stimulus funds for needed safety improvements such as grade crossings, not for new trains that will obligate taxpayers to pay billions of dollars in future additional subsidies.

Learn more at illinoispolicyinstitute.org.