

Obama seeks to expand high-speed rail network



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By Jon Schmitz, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

President Barack Obama's administration is pushing ahead with an ambitious plan to develop a nationwide network of high-speed passenger rail service, despite critics who call it unrealistic.

Vice President Joe Biden announced Tuesday that the president wants to spend \$53 billion over six years toward a goal of making high-speed service available to 80 percent of Americans within 25 years.

The president already has awarded \$10.5 billion under an initiative that he announced in April 2009 to build high-speed rail in 10 designated corridors and through the Northeast. Pittsburgh to Philadelphia is one of the corridors.

"As President Obama said in his State of the Union, there are key places where we cannot afford to sacrifice as a nation -- one of which is infrastructure," Mr. Biden said in a visit to Philadelphia's historic 30th Street Station.

"As a longtime Amtrak rider and advocate, I understand the need to invest in a modern rail system that will help connect communities, reduce congestion and create quality, skilled manufacturing jobs that cannot be outsourced. This plan will help us to do that, while also increasing access to convenient high-speed rail for more Americans."

Critics say the administration has spread the funding too thinly, investing in projects that will provide marginal service improvements while shortchanging the corridor of greatest need -- the Northeast, from Washington to Boston.

The new chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Rep. John L. Mica, R-Fla., said the Federal Railroad Administration botched the selection of projects getting the first \$10.5 billion and likened Tuesday's announcement to "giving Bernie Madoff another chance at handling your investment portfolio."

"What the administration touted as high-speed rail ended up as embarrassing snail-speed trains to nowhere," he said. "Rather than focusing on the Northeast Corridor, the most congested corridor in the nation and the only corridor owned by the federal government, the administration continues to squander limited taxpayer dollars on marginal projects."

Pennsylvania Republican Bill Shuster, chairman of the Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines and Hazardous Materials, also was critical.

"The administration continues to fail in attracting private investment, capital and the experience to properly develop and cost-effectively operate true high-speed rail. ... I am concerned that without appropriate controls to ensure the most worthy projects are the ones that receive funding, high-speed rail funding could become another political grab bag for the president," he said.

Two newly elected Republican governors -- John Kasich in Ohio and Scott Walker in Wisconsin -- campaigned on promises to cancel multimillion-dollar high-speed rail projects in their states.

Ohio had gotten a \$400 million federal stimulus grant to develop passenger rail in the Cleveland-Columbus-Cincinnati corridor; Wisconsin was awarded \$810 million.

Mr. Obama plans to seek \$8 billion for high-speed rail in his budget for the coming fiscal year, which begins in October, the vice president said.

Three types of interconnected corridors would be developed, Mr. Biden said: "core express," with electrified trains on their own dedicated tracks going 125 to 250 mph or faster; regional corridors with speeds of 90 to 125 mph with increased service and reductions in travel times, laying the foundation for future high-speed service; and "emerging" corridors with trains going up to 90 mph and linking to the larger national network.

Henry Posner III, an international railroad executive based in Pittsburgh, praised the Obama administration for its resolve.

"It's very encouraging to me, the Obama administration coming back with rail as such a high priority given all of the politically centered negativity in the past few months," he said from Seattle, on the sixth day of a train trip from Toronto to San Francisco.

"I also think it's healthy that the Republican governors have rejected the money. The end result is that the money will be redistributed on the basis of which states are serious," said Mr. Posner, chairman of Railroad Development Corp.

Pennsylvania, and especially Pittsburgh, have been near the caboose in the funding competition thus far, and Mr. Posner said he doesn't see any signal that will change.

The Harrisburg-to-Philadelphia corridor has been granted about \$26 million for further upgrades on a segment that has seen a 57 percent ridership gain since travel speeds were upgraded to 110 mph over the last decade.

By contrast, the far inferior Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg segment, where trains travel slower than 50 mph, got \$750,000 for a feasibility study into improving service.

"We're still behind the 8-ball," Mr. Posner said. "There's no indication that the state is doing anything about it."

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