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Obama Unveils High-Speed Rail Plan

By [BRIAN KNOWLTON](#)

WASHINGTON — President [Barack Obama](#) on Thursday highlighted his ambition for the development of high-speed passenger rail lines in at least 10 regions, expressing confidence in the future of train travel even as he acknowledged that the American rail network, compared to the rest of the world's, remains a caboose.

With clogged highways and overburdened airports, economic growth was suffering, Mr. Obama said from the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, shortly before leaving for a weekend trip to Latin America.

“What we need, then, is a smart transportation system equal to the needs of the 21st century,” he said, “a system that reduces travel times and increases mobility, a system that reduces congestion and boosts productivity, a system that reduces destructive emissions and creates jobs.”

And he added, “There’s no reason why we can’t do this.”

Mr. Obama said the \$8 billion included for high-speed rail projects in his [stimulus package](#) — to be spent over two years — and an additional \$1 billion a year being budgeted over the next five years, would provide a “jump start” toward achieving that vision.

The stimulus money has yet to be allocated to specific projects, but Mr. Obama said that the Transportation Department had expedited this process and would begin awarding funds to “ready” projects by the end of summer.

The government has identified 10 corridors of 100 to 600 miles in length with greatest promise for high-speed development.

They are: a northern New England line; an Empire line running east to west in New York State; a Keystone corridor running laterally through Pennsylvania; a southeast network connecting the District of Columbia to Florida and the Gulf Coast; a Gulf Coast line extending from eastern Texas to western Alabama; a corridor in central and southern Florida; a Texas-to-Oklahoma line; a California corridor where voters have already approved a line that will allow travel from San Francisco to Los Angeles in two and a half hours; and a corridor in the Pacific Northwest.

Only one high-speed line is now operating, on the Northeast corridor between Washington and Boston, and it will be eligible to compete for funds to make improvements.

Mr. Obama's remarks mixed ambition and modesty, reflecting the fact that American high-speed rail is in its infancy compared with far-flung systems of technological virtuosity like those in France and Japan as well as the network China is rapidly building.

"Imagine whisking through towns at speeds over 100 miles an hour, walking only a few steps to public transportation, and ending up just blocks from your destination," Mr. Obama said. "It is happening right now, it's been happening for decades. The problem is, it's been happening elsewhere, not here."

The president noted that his administration's investments in improving roads, bridges and ports constituted "the most sweeping investment in our infrastructure since [President Eisenhower](#) began the interstate highway system in the 1950s." Still, spending on rail travel in the United States remains a tiny portion of what Eisenhower spent or what Europeans or some Asians are spending.

The president defended his plan both against those who say it seeks to do too much and those who said it does too little.

"This plan is realistic," he said, calling it a "first step that is quickly achievable." Rail spending, he said, would not only provide jobs that "can't be outsourced" but also help reduce the pollution from cars and planes while enhancing the ability to compete.

The National Association of Railroad Passengers welcomed the president's remarks, saying it was "thrilled with this initiative."

"It focuses the administration effort and commitment to high-speed rail and to passenger rail in general," said David Johnson, a vice president of the association. He acknowledged that overall financing was "tiny" compared with European-style train systems but described it as an important start. The fierce competition for resources in a time of economic crisis has strapped the administration's rail ambitions, though it has made no secret of its inclinations.

In making the announcement, the president was joined by Transportation Secretary [Ray LaHood](#) and Vice President [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#), whom Mr. Obama joshingly referred to as "America's No. 1 train fan."

In the Senate, Mr. Biden earned the nickname "[Amtrak](#) Joe" for his regular train use between Washington and his home in Delaware over decades and for his strong support for increased rail financing.

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