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Saturday April 11th 2009

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Apr 8th 2009 | CHICAGO

From *The Economist* print edition**America's trains may soon go faster—relatively**

"WE'RE going to lay some rail!", Rod Diridon shouted to a packed room in Chicago last month. "What kind of rail?" he asked. "High-speed rail!" the room roared back. Mr Diridon, chairman emeritus of the California High Speed Rail Authority, was addressing like-minded folk at the annual meeting of the Midwest High Speed Rail Association. The conference had attracted far more people than anticipated, lured, no doubt, by money. Barack Obama's stimulus contains \$1.3 billion for Amtrak and \$8 billion for high-speed and intercity rail projects. And support will be sustained with \$5 billion in state grants over five years.

France, Japan, Spain, Germany, all have trains that zoom through the countryside at speeds up to 217mph (350kph). America has one "high-speed" rail corridor, from Washington to Boston, on which trains average about 80mph. With new federal cash, rail enthusiasts hope to convert a car-loving country to their cause. High-speed rail holds vast promise, from easing congestion (and speeding the flow of goods and services) to reducing carbon emissions. By April 18th Ray LaHood, the secretary of transport, must present a strategic plan for how the money will be spent. Those hoping for a Shinkansen in their suburb, however, will be disappointed.

In the 20th century rail travel languished as Americans fell in love with cars and interstate highways. Jet travel made railways even less attractive. A thinly scattered population and government subsidies for road and air travel did not help. In 1970 Congress created Amtrak to take over the ailing rail passenger service. Over the years the semi-private corporation has been plagued by poor management and volatile funding. Except for the Washington-Boston line, trains have been mostly slow, unreliable and unpopular. By 2000 rail accounted for just 1% of all intercity commercial trips. On National Train Day in May 2008 Amtrak employees handed out bumper-stickers that read "I'm a trainiac", apparently not realising the irony of placing such a message on one's car.

Trainiacs have had a better stretch of late. Ridership on Amtrak has jumped by 18% over the past two years. In October Congress reauthorised Amtrak for five years, and included plans to advance intercity and high-speed passenger rail. The stimulus added cash and momentum.

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There are reasons, however, to be cautious. First, the cost of any one project far exceeds the money available. California, which has the most advanced plan, would connect the state's biggest cities with trains running at more than 200mph. In November Californians approved \$9.95 billion of bonds for the project. On top of this, officials hope to get \$12 billion-16 billion from Washington. The plan is expected to cost \$40 billion in all. But the stimulus contains only \$8 billion for the whole country.

Second, many plans would make trains high-speed only in a relative sense. Proposals that are cheaper than California's are also slower. A plan for the Chicago-St. Louis line, for example, would speed up trains from 79mph to only 110mph. Multiple road crossings require trains to move more slowly than in Europe. Adding to the problem, most passenger trains run on track owned by freight railways. Congestion makes service less reliable.


Third, some proposed lines make more sense than others. High-speed rail is most viable, reports the Government Accountability Office, when it runs through a crowded corridor for distances of 100-500 miles. Trains must compete with cars and planes for speed, reliability and cost-effectiveness. Brian Taylor, a transport expert at the University of California, Los Angeles, worries that the "coolness factor" of high-speed rail can tempt planners to look for a place to lay track, rather than for problems that fast trains might solve. America has ten official high-speed rail corridors, designated by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) in the 1990s. Each proposal weighs costs and benefits differently.

It is up to Mr LaHood and the FRA to make sense of this jumble. A modern railway system—connected to America's existing roads, airports, subways and buses—could support future economic growth. But there must be a national strategy before the rubber hits the road or, as trainiacs prefer to say, the wheel hits the steel.


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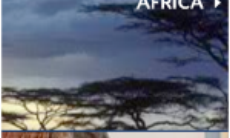
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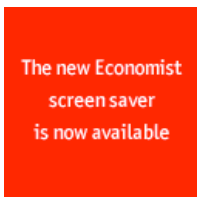
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