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High-Speed Heaven or Boondoggle Express

The Obama administration has come through with some serious money for high-speed rail, but arguments that this might be money ill spent don't spring solely from political nay-saying.

By Michael Todd

“Rail fans like to point out that Abraham Lincoln got roughly \$7 billion — in current dollars — approved for the [first transcontinental railroad](#) during the Civil War. But in a time of crippling state and federal deficits, does America have the political will to spend perhaps a trillion dollars over 20 years on trains?”

So asked Bruce Selraig, [writing in the September-October issue](#) of *Miller-McCune* magazine.

At the time he wrote his article, all of four months ago, the Obama administration had called for dropping \$13 billion on high-speed rail projects across the country, with most of that money — after an unusual game of [largesse avoidance](#) — headed for Florida and California. On Tuesday, Vice President Joe Biden announced another amount — \$53 billion over [the next six years](#).

Speaking at Philadelphia's 30th Street train station, Biden said, “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.”

Biden's announcement wasn't a bolt from the blue. In his [State of the Union address two weeks ago](#), President Obama cited the advances Europe and Asia have made in high-speed rail while arguing “we have to do better. America is the nation that built the transcontinental railroad, brought electricity to rural communities, constructed the Interstate Highway System.”

He added a moment later, “Within 25 years, our goal is to give 80 percent of Americans access to high-speed rail. This could allow you to go places in half the time it takes to travel by car. For some trips, it will be faster than flying — without the pat-down.”

The plan Biden announced calls for \$8 billion to leave the depot in next year's budget, the first car in the expenditure train. Not all would go to high-speed; half of the first year's federal dollars would “revitalize” domestic rail manufacturing or boost intercity rail.

Opponents in the Republican Party have criticized the plans ([after taking the obligatory swipe at Amtrak](#)), arguing the cost is too much right now, and besides, private industry should take a lead if these projects should even leave the station at all. (It's worth noting that the transcontinental plans of the nation's first Republican president did rely on a public-private partnership.)

Talking to *Miller-McCune* in 2008, former Democratic presidential candidate and current rail booster [Michael Dukakis was adamant that government must be involved](#). “There isn't a single system in the world that operates on its own,” he observed.

That \$8 billion figure has been bobbing around for a while — our Lewis Beale used that figure in his look at how stimulus spending might impact high-speed rail hopes. His article argued that once a high-speed rail system was operational, say along California's north-south spine, other states would hop on board.

Some states, though, are [opting to walk](#). In our October story, Selraig suggested Florida's rail plans were “widely considered the most shovel-ready high-speed rail project in the nation.” But the state's new governor, Republican Rick Scott, is being coy about using [federal rail money](#), a stance he debuted even before he took office.

“Rick Scott has no particular aversion to creating a high-speed rail system in Florida,” his [spokesman told a reporter for the state's New York Times-owned papers](#). “However, he does believe that before the state should commit to such a financial obligation, both the upfront capital and ongoing operating cost, that the investment must be justified by demonstrating a return on investment to the citizens whose tax money would be used to fund the system.”

While rail always remains attractive in a world with [terrible traffic problems](#), [decreasing fossil fuels](#) and serious climate change, Scott's



The Obama administration is putting some serious money into high-speed rail, but will the money be ill spent? Some think so. (Jon Curnow/Flickr.com)

stated concerns about a boondoggle ([or that what begins with a federal handout becomes a state handcuff](#)) aren't without merit.

In a 2008 profile of "boondoggle-ologist" [Bent Flyvbjerg and the perils of over-optimism](#), our Ryan Blitstein reported: "The vast majority of public works projects go drastically over budget and aren't as well patronized as proponents claim. [Flyvbjerg] also found that modelers didn't seem to be improving their estimates over time; the scale of overruns remained relatively constant. Rail and highway projects are often the worst boondoggles."

Railway crossings come with warning signs for a reason.

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