



Chicago's high-speed rail dream is arriving

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All aboard!

After a decade of quiet tinkering around the margins, the dream of making Chicago the center of a high-speed rail network finally is taking real shape, thanks to a massive infusion of cash tucked into President Barack Obama's stimulus bill.

Big clout -- by White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, Sen. Dick Durbin, D, and other well-placed Illinoisans -- likely guarantees that the Chicago-based network soon will get as much as \$2 billion for new track, rolling stock, high-tech signals, bridges and other fixes.

If so, in as soon as three or four years, reliable train travel to St. Louis in under four hours, and Madison, Wis., in under three, will be on line, with other routes to the Twin Cities and Detroit on the way.

"The stars have started to align," says Tom Carper, the one-time mayor of Downstate Mattoon who just took over as chairman of the Amtrak Board of Directors. "We'll really be able to show what we can do."

Central to what's about to happen here is the \$8 billion for high-speed rail included in Mr. Obama's stimulus bill -- \$6 billion literally at the last moment, when most other programs were being cut to bring the overall stimulus tab to under \$800 billion.

When I first wrote about this three weeks ago, the buzz was that the money had been inserted by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada, and that the bulk of the \$\$\$ would go to a proposed magnetic levitation (mag lev) from Las Vegas to Los Angeles.

But folks like Howard Learner, a long-time high-speed-rail fan who heads Chicago's Environmental Law and Policy Center, told me otherwise. And in [an under-noticed interview last week with Politico](#), a web-based political site, Mr. Emanuel claimed paternity of the money.

"I put it in there for the president," Mr. Emanuel said. "The president wanted to have a signature issue in the bill, his commitment for the future."

Chicago still will have to compete for funding, not only with Nevada but Florida, the Northeast Amtrak corridor and other areas.

But with a Chicagoan in the White House, his chief of staff from the same town, and the Amtrak chairman, number two Senate Democrat (Durbin) and U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood all from Illinois, you can bet your bippy this region will get its share. Earmarks or not, all those local folk aren't going to let Mr. Reid run off with the cookie jar.

Mr. Learner is hopeful of getting \$2 billion to \$2.5 billion of that money. Chicago also will get a share of \$1.3 billion for capital improvements that will go directly to Amtrak -- \$30 million tentatively is slated for a renovated Chicago maintenance facility that will renovate and repair oft-broken cars and engines -- and Mr. Emanuel said the president will ask for an additional \$1 billion in each of the next five years.

So what actually is coming?

According to George Weber, who heads the railroad unit of the Illinois Department of Transportation, 4-hour service to St. Louis and 2:45 service to Springfield can be established for a cost of \$300 million to \$500 million.

The higher figure reflects the cost of bridges over freight line on Chicago's Southwest Side that often delay Amtrak service.

The bridges, known as flyovers, wouldn't change schedules much but would make those schedules much more reliable.

While most work on the St. Louis line can be done fairly quickly, thanks to improvements already made in recent years, it could take some years to design, win environmental approval for, and build the flyovers, Mr. Weber says.

The next best bet, according to Mr. Weber and others, is the Madison line, which eventually could be extended to Minneapolis/St. Paul. From Chicago, trains would travel the same route as existing 87-minute service to downtown Milwaukee, then travel at 110 miles per hour west to Madison on tracks Wisconsin wants to upgrade.

To the east, Amtrak already owns and has begun work upgrading track in Michigan that ends up in Detroit. But officials in Indiana have not made a priority of upgrading tracks on their portion of the proposed Chicago/Detroit link, at least so far.

To those who might question whether this all is boon or boondoggle, Mr. Weber notes that ridership has soared on the Chicago/St. Louis line the last few years "despite mediocre equipment and performance." Ridership is projected to more than double again, to 1.2 million, with new equipment and faster service the stimulus money should provide, he says.

Now, we're not exactly talking bullet trains here. At best, the service envisioned under the stimulus bill will fund trains travelling at no more than 110 miles per hour.

But local train fans will take that, at least as a first step. And at a time when getting out of O'Hare seems to take at least two hours a trip, any step is helpful.

Bigger plans, for true high-speed, not higher-speed rail, could come later, Mr. Learner says. "The federal funding is a real breakthrough."