

GOP critic calls Joe Biden's \$53 billion high-speed rail plan 'insanity'

Vice President Joe Biden proposes spending \$53 billion on a national high-speed rail network, but important Republicans in the House are less than enthused.



Vice President Joe Biden (r.) and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood (l.) walk to a train at Union Station in Washington Tuesday, heading to an event in Philadelphia to tout plans to improve the nation's high-speed rail infrastructure.

Evan Vucci/AP

By [Daniel B. Wood](#), Staff writer / February 8, 2011

Los Angeles

Vice President Joe Biden Tuesday proposed that the US government infuse \$53 billion into a national high-speed rail network. The announcement was met immediately by deep skepticism from two House Republicans that could be crucial to the plan's success, raising questions about whether it can clear Capitol Hill.

House Transportation Committee Chair Rep. John Mica (R) of Florida said [previous administration grants](#) to high-speed rail projects were a failure, producing "snail speed trains to nowhere." He called Amtrak a "Soviet-style train system" and said it "hijacked" nearly all the administration's rail projects.

Meanwhile, Railroads Subcommittee Chair Rep. Bill Shuster (R) of Pennsylvania said Mr. Biden's plan was "insanity," adding: "Rail projects that are not economically sound will not '[win the future](#)' " – coopting the slogan President Obama coined in his State of the Union address.

With Republicans controlling the House and dedicating themselves to deep budget cuts, any new spending proposed by the White House will face stiff scrutiny. But Congressman Shuster offers some hope of compromise. On Jan. 28 in Hartford, Conn., he proclaimed his support for expanding high-speed rail in the Northeast, backing a network that could stretch from Montreal to Washington, D.C.

"This is the most congested region in the country. High-speed rail here could be profitable," he said.

Biden's plan

According to the plan laid out Tuesday by Biden, the first step of the six-year plan would be to invest \$8 billion to develop or improve three types of interconnected corridors:

- Core express corridors would form the backbone of the national high-speed rail system, with electrified trains traveling on dedicated tracks at speeds of 125 to 250 m.p.h or higher.
- Regional corridors would lay the foundation for future high-speed service, with trains traveling between 90 to 125 m.p.h.
- Emerging corridors would provide travelers with access to the larger national high-speed network and travel at as much as 90 m.p.h.

To backers, the benefits of the plan are twofold. First, it would give a much-needed boost to America's spending on infrastructure. And second, it would provide jobs for the [economic recovery](#).

"If you look at the last 100 years, it has been large public-works projects which have pulled our nation out of every recession," says Barry LePatner, author of "Too Big to Fall: America's Failing Infrastructure and the Way Forward."

Mr. LePatner notes that the building of the Erie Canal opened the Northeast in 1819, the transcontinental railroad connected the populated East to the developing West, and the interstate highway system built under Eisenhower "all opened up vast reservoirs of trade and economic investment."

He suggests that studies show \$1 billion spent on infrastructure remediation produces between 18,000 and 34,000 jobs. "Twenty-five to 35 percent of that then comes back in taxes, and the other multiplies in geometric ratios as spending on food, clothing, shelter, and other goods," he adds.

Big projects, big delays

But building high-speed rail is no easy process, says Leslie McCarthy, a high-speed rail expert at Villanova University's College of Engineering. "Whether or not a bill would or should pass is the easiest part of all this," she says. "The bigger part of the question is purchasing the land, getting right of ways, zoning issues, environmental impact assessments, laying dedicated tracks in a reasonable amount of time."

She says the typical US highway project can be held up anywhere from three to five years at the low end to 12 to 20 years at the high end. "Legislators and the public aren't aware of the number of federal, state, and local laws that agencies have to comply with that can't be gotten around," she adds.

In fact, the very thing that makes the Northeast so attractive for high-speed rail – its population density – could also make it the most difficult place to build. "There is so much population in the Northeast corridor that I don't know if there is even enough room for the dedicated tracks needed for high-speed rail," says Professor McCarthy. "And if the distances you are going are not sufficient to make efficient use of the high speeds, what's the point?"

Wise investment or money pit?

Critics agree. Only two rail corridors in the world – France's Paris to Lyon line and Japan's Tokyo to Osaka line – cover their costs, says Ken Button, director of the Center for Transportation Policy at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va.

"Both of these are the perfect distance for high-speed rail, connect cities over flat terrain with huge populations that have great public transportation to get riders to the railway," he says, dismissing French claims that other lines make money. He says they calculate costs in ways which ignore capital costs.

To supporters of high-speed rail expansion, however, US transportation must move beyond its reliance on oil. High-speed rail is the only form of intercity transportation that has a 45-year record of moving people without oil, says Anthony Perl, professor of political science at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, and a fellow at the Post Carbon Institute.

"That's why 30 countries around the world have done this and the US and Canada are just laggards," he says. "If people want to get where they are going between cities they are going to need high-speed rail because flying and driving will only become more and more costly."