

## Commentary: The Obama rail challenge -- I think we can

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By Henry Posner III

The recent announcement by the Obama administration about high-speed rail has initiated a frenzy of speculation as to what this might mean for Pittsburgh, as the proposed western end of the "Keystone Corridor." As a Pittsburgh resident active in freight and passenger railroading in both this country and Europe, I offer the following comments in order to help focus our thinking.

1. This is a major opportunity for both rail and Pennsylvania. For the first time in history we have a president focused on rail as an environmentally friendly, fuel-efficient alternative to congested highways, for both freight and passengers.
2. High-speed rail to Pittsburgh will not be maglev, and probably not even a bullet train. Funding is limited, and realistically speaking the existence of the Allegheny Mountains provides a geographic constraint not found in France, Japan, Germany and other locations where truly high-speed rail (150 mph and over) flourishes. What is realistic, however, is a more flexible definition of high-speed rail, i.e. using existing rights of way and making incremental improvements for speed and capacity. That this can be accomplished is demonstrated in Sweden, where the often-overlooked X-2000 tilt trains achieve high speeds on the existing lines by taking the curves faster.
3. There is exactly one railroad line west of Harrisburg, that of Norfolk Southern. This is a high-density freight railroad, in contrast with the Amtrak-owned high-speed passenger railroad east of Harrisburg. To the extent that the Norfolk Southern line might be used for higher speeds and increased frequency of passenger service to Pittsburgh, this could be accomplished through a public-private partnership that would not compromise the crucial role that this corridor represents for the national freight network: in most locations what was once a four-track line is now a two or three-track line, so the right of way is already there. Ironically, this would mean restoring much of the capacity that was liquidated in the era of regulation. In those days railroads were considered an obsolete, dying industry, and their downsizing was part of our national transportation policy. Investment in electrification might also be part of the mix, as the environmental benefits would be an additional benefit.
4. Because a limited number of corridors will be funded, and because the Obama initiative is specifically encouraging regions to compete with each other for funding, Pennsylvania will need to get much more serious just to catch up. For example, the Midwest has had a high-speed plan in place for years based on a Chicago hub and incremental improvements to existing corridors, thus positioning them as "shovel-ready" projects. The good news, however, is that the Keystone Corridor lies entirely within the borders of Pennsylvania, and it involves only one railroad; this makes the initiative more manageable.
5. For the above reasons, the steps needed for extension of the Keystone Corridor to Pittsburgh are, in sequential order:
  - a. Construct a vision for the corridor tempered by reality, and consider solutions such as tilt trains given that this is a mountainous, heavy freight corridor.

- b. Focus on a public-private partnership with Norfolk Southern that would not compromise the freight business, which is part of a national network generally acknowledged as the world's best.
- c. Get serious at the state level, keeping in mind that we are competing with other states much further along -- and that the current reality is only one Amtrak train per day between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg.
- d. Focus on creating transportation, as opposed to jobs. Should the economics prove competitive, the jobs will follow as a natural and sustainable byproduct.

As Western Pennsylvanians, we should insist that our political leadership approach this as an opportunity that, if pursued with a combination of realistic expectations, economic discipline and political will, can in fact compete with other corridor initiatives.

My grandfather, James T. MacMurdo, was a signal maintainer for the Pennsylvania Railroad in Blairsville. In the time of the Depression, he was reassigned to work on extending the electrification from Philadelphia to Harrisburg, an investment that created jobs in tough times but more importantly resulted in the infrastructure that serves today as the basis for the revived Keystone Corridor east of Harrisburg.

Interestingly, the ultimate vision was electrification to Pittsburgh; fulfilling this would complete the vindication of an industry characterized as obsolete and bankrupt by the time I entered it. But this is more about the future than about history!

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**Henry Posner III** is chairman of Railroad Development Corporation, [www.rrdc.com](http://www.rrdc.com), which invests in and operates railways worldwide. He can be perceived to be shooting himself in the foot by writing this editorial, as he also serves as chairman of the Iowa Interstate Railroad (which is part of the Midwest High Speed Rail Coalition that is competing for the same funding), and chairman of the Steel City Flyer, a business-class express bus service to Harrisburg (which will be put out of business by high-speed rail). Most recently the government of France announced a joint venture with RDC to revive its carload freight business.