

Let's get on board this train



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Henry Posner III owns railroads from Iowa to Peru, but, with his buttoned-down, deadpan delivery, he seems more like Bob Newhart than Cornelius Vanderbilt.

On this weekday morning, Posner, 54, is talking to a small gathering that's scattered in the auditorium of Rodef Shalom Temple in Shadyside. The Men's Discussion Group here has only one, half-in-jest rule: No speaker is invited if his subject is why old guys need a colonoscopy.

So Posner, as rebellious as any man with a bowtie can be, tells them if their questions aren't good enough, he'll start talking colonoscopies. Only then does he begin his talk, "High Speed Rail to Pittsburgh: So, This Time We're Serious?"

Posner, a Pittsburgh native who lives up some stone steps from the old Schenley High School, is a cynic's cynic. He's been a railroad man his entire life, which means "I've been screwed by everybody."

With his old-time railroad bias, he has no love for Maglev, which just received a \$28 million federal planning grant. Posner sees that

soaking up dollars even as its goal of whisking passengers from Downtown to the under-used Pittsburgh International Airport seems ever less important.

We're leaving the age of cheap gasoline (and, boy, was it fun while it lasted). As more of the world turns ignition keys, the cost of gas will rise. Some of the old ways of getting around will start to look good again.

President Barack Obama dedicated \$8 billion to high-speed rail in the Recovery Act and proposes \$1 billion more in each of the next five years. As big as those numbers seem, they won't go very far. Ken Prendergast of All Aboard Ohio pointed out that France recently decided to spend \$12 billion just buying high-speed rail cars.

"Frequency is more important than speed," Posner says. "A frequent 90-mile-per-hour service is more useful than an infrequent 200-mile-an-hour service."

It's little known but Pennsylvania has two great railroad systems already. Between Harrisburg and Philadelphia, passenger trains are fast, frequent and generally filled, with 14 daily round trips reaching speeds up to 110 mph. West of Harrisburg,

freight travel is dense. Freight rail has never been busier, Posner said, not even during World War II or the robber-baron era.

It's the passenger service out here that's abysmal. Yet when he looks at the state's transit plans, he says, "I don't think we are serious."

The Federal Railroad Administration map shows the high-speed rail corridor continuing from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh, and the state has applied for \$750,000 in stimulus money to study how to make that real. There's also a push to extend that corridor from Pittsburgh to Cleveland.

But that \$750,000 is a pittance in the \$3 billion-plus package that Pennsylvania seeks in federal stimulus money. It won't get all that with only \$8 billion available nationwide, but here's the breakdown: The state Department of Transportation seeks \$2.3 billion to build the Maglev line to the airport; \$490 million to improve the already-buzzing Philadelphia-Harrisburg line; and \$401 million to restore train service between Scranton and Hoboken, N.J.

Rich Kirkpatrick, press secretary for PennDOT, said there are practical considerations behind these priorities. Preliminary engineering has been done east of

Harrisburg so that project is ready to go. The Norfolk Southern line west of Harrisburg, where passenger trains must travel, is the state's most heavily used freight corridor and there has been no preliminary design work. This study will see what it would take to get six to eight trains a day. There could be track upgrades to make the speed competitive with driving, and even a possible link to State College.

Train service from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia is at a historic low, with only one train in each direction since 2003. Posner argues that adding a passenger rail line along that right of way would be cheaper than building a lane of highway. And he wonders why, amid such grand plans and huge numbers, we can't revive something as basic as that second train to Philadelphia and New York that stopped running only six years ago.

At the Pittsburgh station, where only three trains a day leave in any direction, any new ride, even a 60 mph train, would seem a bullet.

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