

Forget about that fast track to Ohio



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By Brian O'Neill, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

This was a good year to run against trains.

New Republican governors of Wisconsin and Ohio both vowed to kill the high-speed rail projects in their states.

The rail advocacy group, [All Aboard Ohio](#), may have to change its name to Everybody Off Ohio. The state will have to give back its \$400 million federal rail grant if Gov.-elect John Kasich (a McKees Rocks native) is true to his word in running the Cincinnati-Columbus-Cleveland train off its still-hypothetical rails.

Ditto for the \$810 million going toward a Madison-Milwaukee train in Wisconsin. Use it or lose it. U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood has said that money could be used for rail projects elsewhere.

Don't expect any of that to come to Pennsylvania, though.

Rep. Jason Altmire, D-McCandless, had been working with his colleague from northeastern Ohio, Rep. Tim Ryan, to extend the Keystone High-Speed Rail Corridor by running a train from Pittsburgh to Cleveland. That project has no chance if Gov. Kasich stands firm, Mr. Altmire said Friday.

That's a shame because it will reinforce this Pennsylvania truth: Train service is phenomenal east of Harrisburg and abysmal west of Harrisburg. Pittsburgh

has just one daily Amtrak train to and from Philadelphia, while 14 run between Harrisburg and Philadelphia.

Recent federal spending emphasizes our split-rail personality.

Trains run fast and nearly filled from Harrisburg east because there's a dedicated, electrified passenger line. To the west, passenger trains share the heavily traveled Norfolk Southern freight line.

Pennsylvania received a \$750,000 federal grant to pay half the cost of a study into improving the Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg line, but we already have studies of choo-choos out the wazoo. We're still waiting on a train.

At the same time, \$26.5 million in federal stimulus money went to remove three remaining grade crossings on the Keystone East corridor to further improve the 110-mph service.

We are, of course, in an era when all federal spending is suspect. The soaring national debt produced only yawns in the 1980s and the early years of this century, but voters are awake to the numbers now. So transportation investments will get more scrutiny, and they should, because we live in a country built almost entirely on the premise of cheap gasoline. Does anyone still think that will last forever?

Evidently, many do. Highway proposals don't get nearly the scrutiny that rail does. There's a widespread mythology that rail is the only subsidized form of travel. But, in fact, car travel is subsidized in hidden ways. Gasoline taxes pay only so much. Snow removal, road salt, traffic lights, street maintenance and highway patrols are just less obvious subsidies.

I asked **Henry Posner III**, who owns railroads from Iowa to Peru, what he thought about the recent turnarounds in Wisconsin and Ohio. The Pittsburgher returned my

call from Paris, where he's looking over European investments.

"I think it's healthy that this is going on in some states," Mr. Posner said. "States that are serious are being separated from ones that aren't."

He didn't like that Ohio's project lacked mass-transit links at the train stations in Columbus and Cincinnati. Wisconsin was building on strong passenger service between Milwaukee and Chicago, but if the commitment isn't there to expand, the money should support the best rail plans in other states.

"What this country needs is a handful of successful projects," Mr. Posner said, "real success stories rather than embarrassing boondoggles that give high-speed rail a bad name."

He's in Europe because his company is launching an intercity high-speed rail business between Hamburg and Cologne, Germany. It will run three trains daily on existing rail "because Germany has invested in infrastructure to run at high speeds" and has transit links all along the way.

Meanwhile, in the USA, where we rely on imports for more than half our oil, we have few alternatives to the highway or the airport. We have no coherent rail strategy. Maybe the states that pick up the dollars that Midwestern governors threw off the train will be the ones that get us on track.

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