

# Delays Persist for U.S. High-Speed Rail

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By RON NIXON

Photo



A northbound Amtrak Acela approached the Baltimore-Washington International Airport station in April. The train has reduced the time it takes to traverse the Northeast corridor, but aging tracks and bridges — including Baltimore's 100-year-old tunnel where trains come to a crawl — have slowed it down. Credit Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

WASHINGTON — [High-speed rail](#) was supposed to be [President Obama](#)'s signature transportation project, but despite the administration spending nearly \$11 billion since 2009 to develop faster passenger trains, the projects have gone mostly nowhere and the United States still lags far behind Europe and China.

While Republican opposition and community protests have slowed the projects here, transportation policy experts and members of both parties also blame the failures on missteps by the Obama administration — which in July asked Congress for nearly \$10 billion more for high-speed initiatives.

Instead of putting the \$11 billion directly into those projects, critics say, the administration made the mistake of parceling out the money to upgrade existing [Amtrak](#) service, which will allow trains to go no faster than 110 m.p.h. None of the money originally went to service in the Northeast corridor, the most likely place for high-speed rail.

On a 30-mile stretch of railroad between Westerly and Cranston, R.I., Amtrak's 150-mile-per-hour Acela hits its top speed — for five or 10 minutes. On the crowded New York to Washington corridor, the Acela

averages only 80 m.p.h., and plans to bring it up to the speed of Japanese bullet-trains, which can top 220 m.p.h., will take \$150 billion and 26 years, if it ever happens.

Florida, Ohio and Wisconsin, all led by Republican governors, canceled high-speed rail projects and returned federal funds after deeming the projects too expensive and unnecessary.

“The Obama administration’s management of previously appropriated high-speed rail funding has been as clumsy as its superintending of the Affordable Care Act’s rollout,” said Frank N. Wilner, a former chief of staff at the Surface Transportation Board, a bipartisan body with oversight of the nation’s railroads.

When Mr. Obama first presented his vision for high-speed rail nearly four years ago, he described a future of sleek bullet trains hurtling passengers between far-flung American cities at more than 200 m.p.h.

“Within 25 years, our goal is to give 80 percent of Americans access to high-speed rail,” Mr. Obama said in his 2011 [State of the Union address](#). “This could allow you to go places in half the time it takes to travel by car. For some trips, it will be faster than flying — without the pat-down.”

But as Mr. Obama’s second term nears an end, some experts say the president’s words were a fantasy.

“The idea that we would have a high-speed system that 80 percent of Americans could access in that short period of time was unadulterated hype, and it didn’t take an expert to see through it,” said Kenneth Orski, the editor and publisher of an influential transportation newsletter who served in the Nixon and Ford administrations. “And scattering money all around the country rather than focusing it on areas ripe for high-speed rail, didn’t help.”

The Acela, introduced by Amtrak in 2000, was America’s first successful high-speed train, and most days its cars are full. The train has reduced the time it takes to travel between Washington, New York and Boston, but aging tracks and bridges — including Baltimore’s 100-year-old tunnel where trains come to a crawl — have slowed it down. Right now it takes two hours and 45 minutes to travel from New York to Washington on the Acela. If the Acela were a bullet train traveling on new tracks, it would take 90 minutes.

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Another problem is that Amtrak’s funding is tied to annual appropriations from Congress, leaving it without a long-term source of money. “I do what I can do,” said Joseph Boardman, Amtrak’s president. “But I don’t sit back and wait for \$15 billion to rebuild the Northeast Corridor.” For now, Amtrak is rebuilding a stretch of track in central New Jersey that will permit 160-mile-an-hour travel for 23 miles.

But advocates say they are hopeful.

“Once something gets built then we’re going to see more projects get going,” said Ray LaHood, Mr. Obama’s first transportation secretary. Mr. LaHood said it took the interstate highway system decades to be completed, and he predicts that high-speed rail will to be the same.

Mr. LaHood said California seemed the most likely candidate for success with high-speed rail, even though plans for a 520-mile train route between Los Angeles and San Francisco have been mired in controversy.

Despite strong backing from Gov. Jerry Brown, a court ruling had tied up state bond funding for the \$68 billion project. An appeals court on July 31 threw out that ruling, which had been based on a lawsuit. But opponents are still increasing calls to kill the project, and polls show waning public support for it.

Still, California has begun construction of the tracks and put out bids for a vendor to build the trains. And the new rail project will get an infusion of funds from the state’s [cap-and-trade](#) program, which requires business to pay for excess pollution.

“The Golden Gate Bridge was tied up for years in hundreds of lawsuits,” said Jeff Morales, executive director of the [California High-Speed Rail Authority](#). “We haven’t had quite that many.”

But Representative Jeff Denham, a California Republican and chairman of the House Transportation subcommittee on railroads, said the state should not be in the railroad business. “High-speed rail can be a good idea; I just think it should be left up to the private sector,” he said. Proposed projects in Texas and Florida, he added, were better models.

In Florida, a private company, [All Aboard Florida](#), is planning a rail line in the wake of Gov. Rick Scott’s [cancellation](#) of a state high-speed rail project in 2011. Trains are to reach speeds of about 125 m.p.h., although they will travel much slower on a proposed route between Miami and West Palm Beach, with a stop in Fort Lauderdale. A final leg to Orlando will begin in 2017, the company said.

The project will be privately financed, but builders have applied for a \$1.5 billion loan from the Federal Railroad Administration. Although it must be paid back with interest over 25 years, with collateral deposited in the interim, critics have called it taxpayer funding. Several counties along the route have also passed resolutions opposing the project.

In Texas, another private company, the [Texas Central Railway](#), has proposed building a high-speed rail line with trains that could reach speeds of up to 205 m.p.h., which could cut the trip between Houston and Dallas to 90 minutes. The Texas project will use the bullet trains popularized in Japan and is planned to open in 2021, said Richard Lawless, chairman and chief executive of Texas Central Railway.

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Mr. Lawless said that the 240-mile Dallas to Houston route was ideal for high-speed rail and that it would make travel times between the two cities faster than by car and competitive with airlines.

“Given the traffic, the growth occurring and the dynamics of the Texas economy, plus the movement between the two metro areas, the demand for this project is very substantial,” Mr. Lawless said.

Still, even if the California, Florida and Texas projects all succeed, transportation experts say it is unlikely that the United States will ever have the same kind of high-speed rail systems as China or Europe.

C. William Ibbs, a professor of civil engineering at the University of California, Berkeley, said countries with successful high-speed rail projects had higher population densities, higher gas prices, higher rates of public-transportation use and lower rates of car ownership. “So it wouldn’t make any sense to have a high-speed rail train in most areas of the United States,” he said. “The geography is different and other factors are just too different.”

But Andy Kunz, executive director of the [U.S. High-Speed Rail Association](#), thinks the United States will eventually have a high-speed rail system that connects the country.

“It’s going to take some years after gas prices rise and highways fill up with traffic,” he said. “It’s going to happen because we won’t have a choice.”