

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Petra Todorovich, Director, America 2050 / Regional Plan Association

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Petra Todorovich:

America 2050's new report: High-Speed Rail in America

America2050 is strongly supportive of the potential for HSR corridors in the nation to link America's Megaregions, which are the most populous regions. Places like the Northeast Megaregion, Southern California, Northern California, the whole Midwest: these are places that are spread out over many hundreds of miles so HSR is a really perfect mode to connect them, and our report looks at what real corridors are most promising in terms of ridership. And to determine that we looked at things like population density and job centers – basically concentrations of employment – existing transit networks, and existing air markets. So, whether people are already traveling between cities under 600 miles apart by air -- that's a good indication of whether there would be demand for real ridership.

Megaregions and HSR

Some critics have charged that the United States is too spread out, and too auto-oriented to really support HSR systems like they have in Europe or Japan or China. But, in fact, when we looked at the distribution of where people live and where people work in the US, we found that in fact the majority of population is concentrated in eleven large megaregions, and those megaregions are the perfect places for investing in HSR. They have levels of density on par with European countries, and they have central business districts where jobs are concentrated in small areas that are really vital to creating the demand and attraction for HSR because much of HSR is business trips. It also serves tourism and recreational leisure trips, but a lot of the demand for HSR is driven by making those business connections, and to the extent that it is business travel it's very good for the economy because that creates economic connections among neighboring regions that can give rise to greater productivity. So, we really honed in on the spatial aspects of the United States, the sort of regional planning factors that contribute to demand for real ridership. Including, to what extent, is the region served by public transit and rail transit already today, because that's a big indication. If you can already get around a region pretty well on public transit, that means you're more likely to visit that region using rail because you know once you get off the train at the station, you can get somewhere. You can walk down the street, or you can jump on a light rail, or you can hail a cab, but you don't necessarily need someone to pick you up or rent a car.

Investing where there's demand

You want to build rail corridors that will be used you want to have full trains, not empty trains. And to the extent that you can attract riders, you can offset some of your operating cost – maybe even much of your operating cost – depending on your success in gaining riders. For example: The existing service on the northeast corridor today which connects Boston to New York to Washington DC and the major cities in between, that rail service run by Amtrak actually generates a net operating revenue from the fares collected for those tickets and those rides. So that's a possibility when you're investing in corridors that will gain ridership so we looked at every region in the country and we pinpointed what's the most promising corridor to start with in each region. And we think that it makes sense for states – and the federal government – to invest in those most promising corridors first, so that you can demonstrate success, and perpetuate and have a sustainable long-term program. It's going to take multiple decades for us to build a national system of rail corridors, like it took 50 years to build the interstate highway system. So we want to start with roots that work, roots that are very attractive to riders, and then if we want to extend to places that take time for the market to build that's something we should consider as well. That's what we did with the interstate highway system. There weren't necessarily strong demands for highway routes through Wyoming when we first built them, but it developed over time. When we're talking about a national network, there are cases to be made for investing in many places around the country but we think it makes sense to invest first in the places with the greatest demand for ridership.

HSR and the new Congress

It's still too early to say how the new Congress will approach transportation. I wouldn't say that it's the best environment that we've had in recent years because obviously we have a new – mostly Republican – class of incoming house members in particular who were elected on platforms of cutting the deficit and reducing government spending. We like to point out that transportation investments and investments in infrastructure generally are what's necessary to build the economy, and grease the wheels for economic interactions that create jobs. We don't see infrastructure as something that just goes out the door and doesn't provide any benefit; in fact, it's a necessary investment for growth, so we're trying to make that case. Traditionally, infrastructure has not been a partisan issue. It has not belonged to Democrats or Republicans; in fact, the transportation bill which gets passed every five or six years is often criticized because it's a hugely popular Congressional pork-filled bill in which there is equal opportunity among Republicans and Democrats to get their projects in. I think there's going to be an effort now to tamper down the earmarking in particular, but traditionally, it's not as if transportation has belonged to Democrats or Republicans; it's been fully bipartisan. Among the transportation advocacy community, we are certainly trying to maintain that bipartisan agreement. How the new members just coming in this January take to that proposition remains to be seen.

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