

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Joseph E. Shacter, Director, Division of Public and Intermodal Transportation, Illinois Department of Transportation

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

The Latest IL DOT Study: Feasibility of 220-MPH High-Speed Rail

First of all, it has always been part of Governor Quinn's vision to bring our passenger rail network as well as all of our other transportation modes, to real 21st-century condition. Even as we are doing a lot of very exciting projects in the state, such as bringing higher-speed rail to the Chicago-St. Louis corridor now, as well as building new service to the quad cities and to Rockford and Dubuque, the governor wanted us to look at the feasibility of doing the so-called "true" high-speed rail—220-mile-per-hour service—to Champaign with branches on to St. Louis and/or Indianapolis. What the study really shows is, as we suspected, the cost of building such a line is many, many times more than the cost of the higher-speed work we are now engaged in and we have the funding to finish. The issue is going to be, going forward, we believe, that as we complete the higher-speed project between Chicago and St. Louis, the 110-mile-per-hour maximum speed program, riders will first get the benefit of this in late 2015, when about 70 to 75 percent of the corridor becomes 110-mile-per-hour capable. We believe, at that point—and the governor believes, at that point—that ridership will pick up to such a degree even more than it already has, which is an enormous growth in ridership. If indeed it grows as much as we think it will, then the public will have a much greater interest in going to that next level of rail transportation, which could be the true high-speed-rail service that's found in Europe and Asia.

Higher Speed at Higher Cost

The reason that it is so much more expensive to build 220 infrastructure is because, to run at speeds over 150 miles per hour, a train line must be exclusively dedicated to that usage and not, as corridors are today, shared with freight railroads. It's for safety reasons. In addition, the corridors must be entirely sealed, which means that there cannot be grade crossings, so you either close crossings or you're building a giant bridge over all roads on a route. We believe, the governor believes, that by investing incrementally now on projects that we can afford and that provide immediate benefit, like the higher-speed project in St. Louis, that that will invigorate the public's interest greatly in taking that next step down the road to explore the implementation of true high-speed rail. I think that this study is a great start to doing that.

Normal, IL: Proof of the Benefits of Better Rail

The associated economic benefit of rail improvement is very tangible, and the example that we like to use constantly is what has happened in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, which is our second-highest ridership station in the state, just below Chicago, of course, and it is along the Chicago-St. Louis corridor. As soon as the 110-mile-per-hour program was announced, Mayor Chris Koos and the city launched a private investment drive for downtown Normal that has absolutely changed the face of that downtown. Since this program was announced, more than \$200 million has been invested by the private sector in reinvigorating downtown Normal. They have built a new hotel; there are new restaurants; there are new living spaces. From what I hear there might be a second hotel going up in downtown. And all of this, of course, is right near the campus of Illinois State University as well. We think that Normal, Illinois is the poster-child for what can happen with economic development around improved rail service. We're very

excited to see similar economic growth occur as we finish the program over the next couple of years.

Why Not High-Speed Rail Now?

I think if you were to ask the average person on the street now if they would vote to spend \$23 billion, which is the minimum cost that's in the study that the University of Illinois did for us, to start doing Chicago to St. Louis at true high speed, that they would say, "Wait a minute. We've got a recession we're still getting out of, and you want to spend how much?" We think that the better way to do this is, and given the ridership growth we have seen on Amtrak service without any improvements yet—225% ridership growth over six years on the St. Louis corridor with no improvements yet—given what we think will happen, we think when people experience what higher-speed rail is all about they'll say, "Wait a minute. This is sensational, but in Europe they go even twice as fast as this. Let's start looking into that for real." We think that the instrumental approach is one that makes sense both practically and politically in terms of eventually implementing the governor's vision of getting this true high-speed service tried out in Illinois.

Washington is Stalling HSR

The Obama administration is the first to ever put significant dollars into high-speed rail, whether you call it high-speed rail, true high-speed rail. This is the first administration to put literally billions of dollars into this effort. The issue has been that ever since the first year of appropriations in Washington there hasn't been any more because, well, the administration has proposed it but the Congress has not agreed to it. We totally agree that without Washington paving the way for this and providing significant portions of the eventual cost, true high-speed rail will not happen. It's because the cost of it is too vast. In fact, we are concerned that once this current batch of projects is done, we want to keep going. We want to do more. Right now the resources have not been identified to do that out of Washington, and we totally agree that they need to be. The Federal High-Speed Intercity Passenger Rail Program needs to be reinvigorated with funds again at the federal level, or nothing will happen because the costs of even the higher-speed work are too high, let alone the bullet-train work. While the administration has tried to position infrastructure as being very important and has tried to put significant dollars behind it, all efforts, frankly, for a lot of very laudable programs in Washington have been somewhat on hold because of the inability of a budget to really get passed. And our transportation and infrastructure needs are caught up in that same rancor that other issues are right now. The government is shut down as we speak, and infrastructure is unfortunately one very, very important element that is affected by that in terms of the ability of budgets with real appropriations for real infrastructure improvements to get passed.

**www.InfrastructureUSA.org
212.414.9220
info@infrastructureusa.org**