

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Joseph Szabo, Administrator, Federal Railroad Administration

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Joseph Szabo:

The importance of high-speed rail

It's about quality of life for the American citizens, and how do you improve mobility while also reducing highway congestion, airport congestion, improving air quality, and reducing consumption of foreign oil? HSR, upgrading passenger rail, is a critical element of achieving this, and achieving balance for our transportation network.

Creating a rail system that meets market demands

When you talk about a vision for passenger rail it's very important that you view it in a comprehensive passenger rail network. Many people mistakenly believe that every train in Europe or Asia is going 200 mph, where on the contrary, the TGV in France is only carrying about 28% of the passengers, the regional trains are in many cases, the workhorses, and so while 200 mph service is a very, very important element of our plan for the United States, our view is very comprehensive. We understand that there are markets in regions where emerging high-speed rail service at 125 mph actually is much more cost effective in providing this mobility, and clearly there need to be upgrades in existing service. It's a matter of matching the level of service, and the speed of the service, with what the market demands are, and achieving trip times that are competitive to, or superior to, air and auto travel.

Learning through experience

This is a program that's in its infancy, so there are always lessons that are learned and steps that can be taken for improvement as you move forward. To a great extent, it's a lot like watching a young child develop. The advancement is impressive, and yet, on occasion, there is a misstep and the key is to make sure that there are lessons learned from those missteps. We're pleased with the progress of the program and how far we've come since the President announced the first grant recipients 11 months ago.

The role of the Federal Rail Administration

Congress set up the HSR program as a state driven program. It's federally funded, but it's state driven. It's really incumbent upon states to determine what are their mobility needs, and what is the vision for providing mobility to the public

for the future, and how are we going to move what is going to be 70 million more people in the next 25 years. How are we going to move them while reducing fuel consumption, improving congestion, and making reductions in the use of foreign oil? And so, as states develop their transportation plans, our federal program is here to provide funding for rail programs to help them provide a balanced transportation network.

Getting the most out of infrastructure investment

There's no question that strategic investments in infrastructure can be tremendous job generators, and a very important component of reinvigorating domestic manufacturing. When you take a look at the mobility needs of this nation, congestion is worsening, air quality continues to be a concern, and the consumption of foreign oil continues to be a problem. We need to be strategic with these infrastructure investments to ensure we're getting a maximum return, providing mobility for Americans, while also improving congestion, improving air quality, and reducing consumption of foreign oil.

Where high-speed rail works best

It is important to note that HSR is not necessarily a silver bullet in every market. It's a matter of understanding your market opportunities. HSR can be the most efficient mode of transportation in moving people between cities of appropriate density that are within roughly a 500 mile radius. So it's a matter of understanding where these opportunities are, and these are the potential markets for success. Certainly nobody is going to be looking at taking an HSR train from New York to California, and that's not what our vision is about. Air travel is clearly more efficient over these long distances. In distances of 500 miles or less, where you have the population densities, there's no question of passenger rail superiority when it comes to an efficient mode of moving people.

Where to look for high-speed rail in the future

Currently California is moving forward with their state vision for a network that connects San Francisco and Los Angeles. The population densities are strong, the distance is appropriate; it really is a tremendous opportunity for success with a 200mph plus rail network. Florida is taking a look at their plan; the first leg is between Tampa and Orlando; ultimately it will connect Orlando and Miami. And, again, these are good markets where there is wonderful opportunity for success. In the Midwest they're taking a little bit more of an emerging HSR project, speeds of more 110-125 mph, connecting cities like Chicago-St. Louis, Chicago-Detroit, Chicago-Milwaukee, and so there's some tremendous opportunities there. North Carolina is moving forward with their vision. Washington state and Oregon are moving forward with their vision. So, these are just a handful of the places where we're starting to see construction and projects moving forward today.

Why Americans aren't engaged

I think, historically, infrastructure is something that's been taken for granted. The quality of our infrastructure the last 50 years has generally been very good. It certainly isn't a sexy topic – the type of thing that draws attention. When it comes to passenger rail, in particular, we've just gone through a period of the love affair with the automobile. It's a symbol of freedom for Americans. But now we've gotten to the point where we can no longer build our way out of the congestion that has resulted from growth in population and growth in the use of automobiles, so there has to be balance in the transportation network. There have to be travel alternatives, so we can ensure that we continue to provide good mobility to citizens. Infrastructure is one of those things that too often Americans just take for granted. They expect it to be there, and don't really contemplate the level of planning and investment that is necessary to make sure that these mobility needs are going to be met over the next several decades.

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