

NYS Rail Summit

News Clips of the June 14, 2010 Event

****High-speed rail gaining steam - Summit focuses on benefits of high-speed network for upstate
Times Union
June 15, 2010**

ALBANY -- Efforts to build a high-speed rail network across upstate New York appeared to be gaining momentum Monday as more than 250 federal, state and industry officials gathered to tout its economic benefits to a region that has been hit particularly hard by the recession.

The event was the New York State Rail Summit, hosted by the Empire State Development Corp. and the state Department of Transportation, and held at the College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering at the University at Albany.

U.S. Rep. Louise Slaughter explained some of the difficulties of journeying between upstate cities.

"You can't fly from Buffalo, Rochester or Syracuse to Albany," the Rochester congresswoman said. "If I had come on Amtrak, I would not have the foggiest idea when I'd get here," she added, explaining that Amtrak trains often must wait for freight trains to pass.

"We need to move into this century in this country," Slaughter said, referring to the lack of progress on passenger rail when compared to other industrialized nations.

Actually, there is one daily round-trip flight between Buffalo and Albany, and as it happens, the train from Buffalo was on time Monday morning.

But there is no direct air service to the state's capital city from the other two cities, and the train from Buffalo more often than not is late.

So where does the money come from? State Senate President Malcolm Smith suggested that at least some financing might be available from foreign sources, such as the Chinese government, which is building high-speed corridors in other countries.

He also suggested an authority to issue bonds.

U.S. Rep. Paul Tonko suggested raising the funds through agencies that already exist, such as the Empire State Development Corp.

And John Parisella, delegate general for the government of Quebec, said his province might consider financing high-speed rail corridors even beyond Quebec's borders.

The federal government for the first time has made a major commitment to rebuilding the nation's passenger rail network, providing more than \$8 billion so far for projects in Florida, California, New York and other states.

Some of the money will go to build a third track between Batavia and Rochester that would be dedicated to passenger rail traffic.

Slaughter, who has ridden in an Amtrak locomotive cab and said there is enough space for the additional track, said the goal initially would be to have 110-mph service on that track.

Later, overhead catenary lines could be built and electric trains traveling at 150 mph or more could use the track.

Perhaps it was no coincidence that a corporate sponsor of Monday's event was National Grid, although it also would have a vested interest in the economic development that could be expected along the high-speed corridor.

Slaughter said the bridges and overpasses were built to accommodate four tracks. Two tracks were ripped up after rail traffic declined.

CSX, which owns the tracks, has made it clear that it doesn't think mixing high-speed passenger trains on the same tracks as freight is safe. It also has balked at a separate, third track, insisting it be built in a "secure corridor," although Karen Rae, deputy administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration, said the railroad's attitude toward high-speed rail was "improving."

CSX and the state DOT reached an agreement two weeks ago allowing planning to move ahead, and an environmental impact statement to be prepared.

Slaughter said she expects that to move quickly.

"An environmental impact statement shouldn't be lengthy and cumbersome," she said, "because there's never been anything there before but a railroad track."

What could high-speed rail do?

It would permit workers in Buffalo to commute to Rochester, and vice versa, or workers to commute between Rochester and Syracuse.

"Our highly skilled work force is largely siloed within each upstate city," Slaughter said. And people can work on a train.

Paul Dyster, the mayor of Niagara Falls, said he worked on his laptop on the way to Monday's meeting, and even had an opportunity to nap.

"If you're sleeping on the train, that's a more productive use of your time than driving and not being able to do anything else," Dyster said.

And for those who question the risk of investing billions in a high-speed rail network, Aaron Gavin Woolf, an independent filmmaker whose work includes the PBS documentary "Beyond the Motor City," drew a comparison with the Erie Canal.

"Immediately upon completion, freight costs dropped 70 percent," he said. "There are some who suggest if the Erie Canal had not been built, the nation's primary port might have been New Orleans."

And Bourbon Street, not Wall Street, might have been the nation's financial center, he added. Eric Anderson can be reached at 454-5323 or by e-mail at eanderson@timesunion.com.

****NY explores ways to fund high-speed rail**
Albany Business Review
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New York must make a long-term commitment to a high-speed rail system if the state expects the program to yield economic benefits.

"The key is, it must be sustainable. An initial investment will not continue to support the initiative," said Michael Tucker, president and CEO of the Albany-based Center for Economic Growth.

That was one of the messages delivered at Monday's high speed-rail summit held at the University at Albany's College of Nanoscale Science and Engineering. The event, which attracted 300 transportation, economic development and rail industry experts, was sponsored by Empire State Development Corp. and the state Department of Transportation.

Tucker made his comments during one of the five forums held at the day-long summit. New York, which faces a \$9.2 billion deficit, wants to upgrade the 263-mile Empire Corridor for high-speed passenger travel but does not have a long-term investment plan for the project. It would cost at least \$3 billion to convert the corridor, which runs from New York City to Buffalo.

Earlier in the day, state Senate President Malcolm Smith (D-Queens) said the 2010-11 budget commits some funds to advance high-speed rail. Gov. David Paterson's office said last week that the executive budget contains \$51 million over two years for rail improvements. Most of that money will be used to upgrade other rail projects.

Smith said state legislators may create a rail authority that could borrow funds to advance a high-speed passenger system. Government-created authorities operate independently and have legal power to bond projects.

A counsel general from China who attended Monday's summit told Smith his country is interested in loaning money for portions of the project, much like it has done in other countries. China recognizes that manufacturing for the project would be done in New York, Smith said.

As many as 3,500 workers in upstate New York are employed by 30 companies that manufacture railroad equipment and generate a combined \$750 million in revenue, state officials said.

John Parisella, a delegate general from Quebec, said Canada wants to extend the rail system to Quebec and is willing to finance rail corridors beyond its own borders. Canada does a lot of trade with New York and much of the business comes from small- to medium-sized companies, he said.

Currently, passenger trains traveling north from New York City average speeds of 58 miles per hour. The goal is to increase speeds to 110 mph initially, and eventually to 150 mph, said U.S. Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-NY), a long-time proponent of high-speed rail.

Slaughter called New York's current system an "embarrassment that is falling apart." New York received \$151 million in first-round stimulus funds to advance high-speed rail along its Empire Corridor. Of that amount, \$90 million will be used to build a second track from Rensselaer to Schenectady.

In a perfect world, the tracks from Albany to Buffalo could be completed in 2 1/2 years, Slaughter said. Actually, the improvements would be built in increments and take much longer. Slaughter said the rail corridor has plenty of space for a third track; it once had four tracks before the system deteriorated.

Parisella and others praised rail's eco-friendly benefits, citing the advantages of having fewer cars on the road, fewer greenhouse gas emissions and less reliance on foreign oil. President Obama designated \$2.5 billion of stimulus money for a second round of rail funding in 2010. Applications for that money are due later this summer, said Marie Corrado, director of DOT's Major Projects Office. A long-term goal is to connect the Empire Corridor to large cities in other states, Corrado said.

Petra Todorovich is director of America 2050, a planning organization based in New York City. Todorovich said it's impossible to determine a cost-benefit analysis for rail because there are so many variables.

"One thing we know is that rail doesn't pay for itself. And it shouldn't," she said. "New York City's subway system doesn't pay for itself, but it's necessary for economic growth.

****Transportation meeting over high speed rail**

WXXA, Fox 23

June 14, 2010

Economic and transportation officials discussed the future of high speed rail in the Capital Region at the SUNY Nano College Monday.

The day-long conference began early with over 200 business leaders and railroad executives taking part.

They said New York's plan to bring in high speed rail will bring jobs and boost tourism across the state.

New York was recently awarded \$151 million for rail improvements along the Albany and Buffalo corridor.

****Future of high speed rail in New York State discussed**

YNN

June 14, 2010

The future of high speed rail in New York was the hot topic in Albany Monday. Erin Connolly was at the high speed rail summit and joined us from the Rensselaer Rail Station with more on its impact on commuters.

ALBANY, N.Y. -- The effort to bring high speed rail to New York State is moving forward. More than 200 public and private shareholders gathered Monday for a summit.

State leaders say high speed rail will boost the upstate economy and encourage tourism. New York has already received more than \$150 million in stimulus funding for high speed rail and one of the first projects will be building a second rail between Albany and Schenectady.

But still, a major topic at the summit was securing more funding connecting all upstate cities and also Montreal.

"So if we can make passenger rail a reliable speedy service between our major upstate cities, it will beat the alternative of driving between these cities," said Stanley Gee, Acting NYS DOT Commissioner.

"The ease and the ability for us to get from location to location is an imperative. What it does for us from the environment is an imperative and as well as from an old life the ability to move goods," said Dennis Mullen, Empire State Development Chairman and CEO.

Those attending the summit also discussed what role state agencies will play in high speed rail development and how to promote future projects.

****New York Looks to Board High Speed Rail**

Gothamist

June 17, 2010

Will fast trains such as Spain's Velaro, be coming to New York?

Imagine making the trip from New York City to Albany by train in under an hour. For politicians, lobbyists, reporters and business people, it would be a godsend. Currently the trip takes two-and-a-half hours.

And there are grander reasons to hope cities across the state will soon be connected by high speed rail according to Sen. Malcolm Smith. First, he said, it will create jobs, some 200,000 of them by Smith's estimate, "from construction to finance and other things." Second he said, it will improve the environment. And lastly, he said, "This will bring the state together. It will make the concept that we have been talking about of one New York a reality. This will be one New York, for real."

To jump start this process Smith plans to introduce legislation as early as Friday to create a committee under the state Department of Transportation to recommend ways to fund high speed rail in New York. The committee would also determine the proper kind of entity to oversee high speed rail and possibly issue bonds to fund it.

Gov. David Paterson has his own bill that would accomplish the same thing.

Picking Up Speed

Smith's idea is not entirely new. Creating a high speed rail system across New York has been on the agenda for decades without getting anywhere. What's put the project back on the agenda in Albany is the Obama administration's offer of an incentive to kick start the development of speedier train service throughout the country. Earlier this year, the administration offered \$8 billion in grants to states that want to update their rail systems.

When the grants were handed out, however, New York wound up getting only \$151 million of the \$4 billion it had applied for. California, a state with a well-crafted high speed rail plan, received over \$2 billion; Florida and Illinois will receive around \$1 billion, Wisconsin \$822 million, Washington \$590 million.

Although New York lacks the sort of comprehensive plan California has developed, officials here say New York is taking incremental steps toward initiating its plan. Legislators including Smith and U.S. Rep. Louise Slaughter say they expect the state to apply for more federal money. They will have a chance to do that, as \$2.5 billion in federal rail funding will be up for grabs this summer during another round of funding. Applications are due this summer.

Faster and Costlier

If \$151 million doesn't sound that paltry, a lot more is needed to move Smith's vision toward reality: \$90 million of the funds New York has been awarded will go just to build a second track from Rensselaer to Schenectady. The state is expected to spend \$58 million to build an 11-mile high speed test strip in upstate New York.

Why was New York shorted during the first round of federal funding? Many rail experts say New York did not present a plan that met the terms of the available grants, didn't have a single agency taking charge of the project and lacked an agreement with CSX, the company that owns the rails along which the state would like to build its high speed system.

"There were a couple of conflicting factors," said Yoav Hagler, an associate planner with the Regional Plan Association. "They didn't have an environmental impact statement and the timelines didn't work."

A few weeks ago, New York and CSX came a notch closer to removing one of those impediments, as they agreed to allow the state to do an environmental impact study on running another line along the CSX routes. CSX has said in the past that adding a passenger line would be unsafe.

High speed rail would initially run somewhere around 110 mph. Eventually as the system improved, the speeds would increase. The goal would be to create a high speed corridor running from Buffalo to New York City. The fast trains would eventually run through the northeast corridor, making train travel between major northeastern cities much faster, cutting the trips from New York to Boston and Washington by hours.

How to Get Federal Funds

On Monday, over 200 people gathered in Albany for a high speed rail summit to discuss ways to fund the project and how it will help business in the state.

After the summit, Smith said mimicking California could help get the state more federal funding. That state has a complete plan as well as a separate entity that controls its high speed rail project. "I would like to follow the California model very closely," said Smith, adding, "At the summit we were talking to representatives from the Obama administration about what we need, if we are on track. There was no 'yes' or 'no,' but if we are doing the right things ... we do need a separate entity to take on this massive endeavor."

Bruce Becker of the Empire State Passenger Association agrees. "We support an independent board to oversee high speed rail. Nothing against the Department of Transportation, but they have other interests, and thruways are their main concern," he said.

Dennis Mullen, chairman of the Empire State Development Corp., said he thought a single entity overseeing the project could only help a massive undertaking such as creating a high speed rail system in New York.

Other funding ideas are also on the table. Smith said that a delegate from China who was visiting the Capitol this week told him that his country is interested in funding New York's high speed rail projects. He also thinks the possible authority which could be created by his bill could issue bonds to fund the trains.

Certainly, the project would require large amounts of additional funding. As of now, Paterson's budget contains only about \$50 million in funding for all rail projects — not just high speed -- to be stretched over the next two years.

The Economic Effects

At Monday's summit, Mullen talked about how the Empire State Development Corp. could help businesses tap into the excitement high speed rail will generate. He noted that a number of employers around the state manufacture rail equipment. One company with a New York presence, Bombardier, has shrunk from 1,000 to 200 employees over the last decade. Mullen said he thinks that workforce could grow again if New York and the rest of the country get on the high speed bandwagon.

"I'm very optimistic," said Hagler about the prospects of developing high speed rail in New York and the Northeast Corridor. "We are certainly in a better place than we were two years ago. States are working together now."

If New York and surrounding states can establish a high speed corridor Hagler thinks the New York economy would benefit, as would the crowded transit system. "The New York region is the bottleneck in the system. Any plan that improves the rail system or installs high speed rail is going to benefit New York. Being able to reach Washington in an hour and a half is certainly going to benefit New York's downtown business district," he said.

A recent study by the U.S. Conference of Mayors backs Hagler up. The report states that high speed rail throughout the country could create 150,000 new jobs and \$19 billion in new businesses by 2035. The report details how upstate regions could be sucked into New York's economic sphere thanks to fast travel times, with commerce spreading at faster rates.

The Long Road Ahead

While the northeast holds the greatest potential for high speed rail in the U.S., Oliver Hauck, CEO of Siemens AG, told the New York Times that the Northeast Corridor is the high speed route furthest from actually being built.

Politicians repeat their mantra that the progress toward high speed rail in New York is incremental. Existing rail lines need to be improved, studies need to be conducted, and the project needs funding. "Coming from the private sector into the public sector, I think we do a bad job of managing expectations," said Mullen. But, he added, "It's good that we have to follow the processes required by constituents. We have these processes for a reason."

Becker agrees, "We support incremental steps. Perhaps in scope we have to start small, but we can't wait for the first groundbreaking in the projects to signal to New Yorkers that the process has begun after decades of study and inaction."

Others, though, are concerned that New York is more concerned with getting federal money to maintain its existing rail structure than actually planning for high speed rail.

"We should be deliberate," said Hagler. "But I disagree with some folks who want there to be incremental steps but say we can't move ahead with high speed rail plans simultaneously. If we want to meet the demands of 2040 and 2050 we need to start planning now."