

U.S. needs high-speed rail

Alternative to flying would help environment, economy

By Dr. Phillip Wright
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A recent report in the Wall Street Journal described China's plans for a huge upgrade of its rail system. Among other growth-oriented upgrades, it intends to add 4,340 miles of new, high-speed track dedicated to passenger traffic by 2010. Some parts of the system will have trains exceeding 200 mph. Europe has had high-speed trains for decades over much of the continent. The Japanese have had high-speed trains, in excess of 200 mph, for decades as well. All of these countries, especially China, as they anticipate growth, see a strong rail system (passenger and freight) as an indispensable part of infrastructure, necessary to compete in world markets.

The U.S., however, languishes in the backwaters of rail development. We have a few hundred miles of "high-speed" passenger rail from Washington, D.C., to Boston. Even that train speed maxes out at 150 mph, averaging significantly slower.

There are numerous reasons we need better rail service. Recent headlines reported seven- to 10-hour waits on the tarmac for a number of planes. What wasn't mentioned was the many more planes that sat on the tarmac for three to four hours – some, like the one I was on, then came back to the gate and didn't even take off.

Our hub airports are overcrowded. Security is a pain. Air travel (and for that matter, car travel) consumes much more fuel per passenger mile than rail travel. Rail also has the advantage of going from city center to city center, with no long cab rides to town from the airport and back again.

Opening the Baker Street Station in downtown Fort Wayne would do more to increase the vitality of the downtown area than a stadium or any of the Harrison Square projects being offered now. How did the rest of the developed world surpass us in this category? While Washington insists that the U.S. rail system have lower and lower subsidies, all of the other countries see it for what it is: an investment in the future. While our government keeps pushing Amtrak to be independent, other governments pour billions into rail growth and development. It is odd that our leaders feel that rail travel should not cost the government anything when they pour billions into more roads, expensive airports and Transportation Security Administration staff.

We need good high-speed rail as an alternative to flying. As a security concern, when the air system is down, we could count on a robust rail system to keep us going. Snow and rain don't slow rail travel. High-speed rail does get slowed when it has to share tracks with freight, so it has to have separate tracks, but that is a worthwhile investment. The speed requires gentler curves and elevations rather than crossings. So initially, big investment is needed. No one but government can do this.

At a time when the U.S. desperately needs energy independence, rail travel is ideal. If we had visionary leadership in Washington, we could move forward with this important building block to our economic competitiveness in the world. And we could do it with a fraction of the money we have poured down the drain each of the last few years in Iraq.

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