

## Opinion: Minnesota can't wait for the fast train to Chicago

(The following column by Conrad deFiebre appeared on the Twin Cities Daily Planet website on October 12, 2009.)

MINNEAPOLIS, Minn. — The long-deferred dream of a fast passenger train network in the United States got a big boost toward reality when President Obama pushed for and won an \$8 billion high-speed rail appropriation in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (along with billions more for roads, transit and airports).

By the latest count, federal officials have received \$57 billion in applications for that money from at least 34 states, many of which showed no interest in reviving passenger rail until Uncle Sam started dangling grant dollars with nine zeroes in front of the decimal point.

Minnesota, as a charter member of the 13-year-old Midwest Regional Rail Initiative, still stands to benefit, at least indirectly, from the this initial round of funding -- along with other states in the Midwest combine and places like California and Florida that have shown longtime commitments to fast rail planning.

But the new federal support for improved passenger rail service has also sparked a high-stakes tug-of-war over where to route the Minnesota portion of a St. Paul-Chicago connection. For years, state officials have planned to use existing tracks of the Canadian National Railway stretching along the Mississippi River from St. Paul to Red Wing, Winona and a crossing into Wisconsin at La Crescent.

Now the Mayo Clinic and other Rochester interests are arguing that the trains from Chicago should run into their area instead via costly new right-of-way to the Twin Cities. A report prepared for the Mayo-led Southeastern Minnesota Rail Alliance and released last week touts projected revenue, ridership and travel time advantages for the Rochester route over the one along the river.

Certainly, in an ideal world, Minnesota's third-largest city and its internationally renowned medical center should be served by new-generation fast passenger trains. Even so, the Rochester area's 200,000 residents don't weigh heavily against the main goal of connecting 3 million Twin Citians and 9 million Chicagoans with several million Wisconsinites along the way.

In the real world, Minnesotans will have to choose how to enter the emerging rapid rail era based on the actual costs in money, delay and political and environmental controversy.

Unfortunately, the Southeastern Alliance study either ignores these issues or papers them over with questionable cost assumptions and a wishful focus on the far distant, multibillion-dollar prospect of true high-speed U.S. passenger trains to match those in Europe and Asia. For example:

\* The river route's many tight curves won't support train speeds beyond the 110 m.p.h. limit now envisioned for most of the Midwest passenger system; in many places the trains won't be able to top 90. Noting that, the study says the Rochester route can be laid out to accommodate 220 m.p.h. bullet trains sometime in the future while building now to full 110 m.p.h. standards that would shorten the St. Paul-Chicago travel time by 30 minutes, attract 10 percent more riders and yield 25 percent greater operating margins.

\* The upfront cost for this would be \$973 million, including right-of-way acquisition and track construction, the study says. It asserts that the cost of the river route has risen to \$834 million, up from a \$380 million estimate reached by the same consultants five years ago. The sharp increase comes by way of inflation and the consultants' recent conclusion that the river route would require laying new dedicated track for upgraded passenger service. But Minnesota Department of Transportation officials say that isn't needed, reducing the real inflation-adjusted cost of the river route to \$550 million to \$600 million.

\* The study downplays the cost of buying land for the new route, saying it typically consumes less than 5 percent of total project outlays. And it totally overlooks the potential for neighborhood and environmental opposition to laying tracks capable of carrying trains past someone's backyard at 220 miles per hour. With right of way already in place, those issues wouldn't arise along the river. Still, the study makes the doubtful claim that either alignment could take seven to eight years to complete. Others say the river route can be opened in five years while the Rochester option could take 20.

"Minnesotans would pay a high price and wait a long time to get far less than what the river route offers," said Winona Mayor Jerry Miller. He and other supporters of the river route note that, unlike the Rochester option, it is fully planned and ready for construction that will improve freight and commuter rail services as well.

Rochester people know well the hackles that railroad plans can raise. The Mayo successfully fought off a proposal to run strings of giant coals trains on existing tracks near its health care facilities. Now rural residents are up in arms over a \$325 million alternative that would reroute freight trains on new right of way south of the city.

Dave Christianson, MnDOT project manager for the state's forthcoming comprehensive rail plan, said the river route remains a clear cost and feasibility winner over Rochester's bullet train dreams. Upgrading freight railroad tracks for 110 m.p.h. passenger service runs about \$1 million a mile, the same as repaving a county road in Minnesota, he said. Super high-speed infrastructure, with fully dedicated tracks and total grade separation of road crossings, costs at least \$200 million a mile, he added.

In this debate over the future of fast passenger rail, Minnesotans should focus on what can be done at a reasonable cost within a reasonable time - and not let the perfect become the enemy of the good.