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Northeast trails in race for rail funds

The Boston Globe

\$8b in US aid is up for grabs

By Alan Wirzbicki, Globe Correspondent | May 18, 2009

WASHINGTON - As the Obama administration prepares to hand out \$8 billion in seed money for a national network of fast trains, New England finds itself competing against states and regions that have put far more time and money into planning.

Until late last year, New England lacked a regionwide high-speed rail organization - an illustration, transit advocates said, of the region's belated effort to craft a high-speed rail plan encompassing all six states.

As a result, advocates fear, a region that hosts the fastest train in the nation, Amtrak's Acela, and has no shortage of ideas for improved rail service, may miss out on the funding in favor of California and the Midwest, which have been methodically developing high-speed rail plans for decades.

"New England needs to be better organized," said Tom Irwin, a senior attorney for the Conservation Law Foundation and one of the founders of the New England Regional Rail Coalition, the group assembled last year that is lobbying for a share of the high-speed rail funding that Congress approved as part of the economic stimulus plan.

Regional officials cited the institutional difficulties of coordinating between six states, which sometimes allows any one state to block planning efforts. In addition, northeastern lawmakers actively opposed creating a regional rail compact earlier this decade when the Bush administration sought to shift responsibility for the Northeast Corridor to the states along its route.

The states rejected the idea, fearing that the administration was trying to transfer costs of maintaining the corridor to them, but the failure to create a consortium left the states without a mechanism to develop rail plans.

"Unfortunately, our small states kind of do things in a vacuum. They don't talk to each other," said David McCluskey, deputy speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives, who introduced legislation in Connecticut last year that would have encouraged northeastern states to create a regional rail association modeled on the Midwest effort.

At least four corridors in New England - the current Northeast Corridor, encompassing the coastal route through Connecticut, plus existing or envisioned lines linking Boston with Albany, N.Y., Montreal, and Portland, Maine - will be eligible to receive a share of the \$8 billion, according to the Federal Railroad Administration.

Currently, Acela trains travel at speeds of up to 150 miles per hour, but average less than 70 miles per hour between Boston and New York, too slow to qualify as high-speed rail by international standards.

Densely settled and with many existing conventional-speed rail operations, New England is ideal territory for high-speed rail, but advocates said disputes between states over cost and routings have sometimes hampered progress.

For instance, a study that would have established cost estimates for the proposed line linking Boston and Montreal via New Hampshire and Vermont was vetoed by New Hampshire legislators in 2004, even after a preliminary analysis determined that the proposal was feasible.

"We are probably behind some other areas when it comes to the status of the project," said Christopher "Kit" Morgan, administrator of the New Hampshire Bureau of Rail and Transit. "If the study had gone forward, been completed, and we had a corridor plan, we probably would be better positioned to apply for high-speed funding than we are now."

California, which has been planning a high-speed rail line between San Francisco and Los Angeles since the 1990s, and a consortium of Midwestern states that hope to build a network of routes with President Obama's hometown of Chicago as a hub, are widely believed to be frontrunners for the funding.

Representative John Mica of Florida, the ranking Republican on the House Transportation Committee, said that the two regions were better prepared than anywhere else in the country, and pointed out that both have strong backing from powerful lawmakers.

"Let's face it, politics comes into play," he said.

California voters also approved a \$9 billion bond issue for high-speed rail last November, providing a financial base that other regions lack.

Steve Van Beek, president of the Eno Transportation Foundation, a think tank in Washington, said focusing federal resources outside the Northeast may benefit the region in the long run by expanding the base of political support for high-speed rail, thus making it easier to obtain long-term funding.

"That is how the highway system was built," Van Beek said. "Amtrak's problem over the years was that Amtrak was relevant in only a few select corridors, and yet to get an appropriation you need to have a wider constituency."

Still, officials in New England said they intend to fight for the stimulus funding. New Hampshire is planning to apply for funds to upgrade the Boston-Montreal corridor as far as Concord to provide commuter rail service, Morgan said.

And the agency that operates Amtrak service between Boston and Portland will ask for funds to extend the line to Brunswick, Maine, according to Patricia Quinn, its executive director.

Planners also want funding to add trains on Amtrak's so-called inland route between Boston and New York via Hartford, connecting Worcester and Framingham directly with New York.

"That's where the people are," said McCluskey, who represents a suburban Hartford district.

If the Obama administration gets its way, the grants awarded this year will not be the last chance for federal money. The administration has said the \$8 billion, which will be awarded via competitive grants, is only a "down payment" on a national network, and has requested an additional \$5 billion over the next five years. Detailed guidelines for distributing the money will be released in June.

Rob Kulat, a spokesman for the Federal Railroad Administration, said he could not comment on New England's plans but praised efforts in California and the Midwest. He said states that lacked shovel-ready projects would be encouraged to apply for money to conduct planning.

"They can apply for a planning grant, which would help them with the environmental reviews or whatever kind of planning they need," he said.

Former Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, a longtime supporter of improved rail service, said regional leaders need to step up their efforts if New England is to win a significant portion of the money, but he also expressed sympathy for state governments that were seemingly caught off guard by the unexpectedly large infusion of support for projects that until recently had seemed out of reach.

"The states have to get cracking," Dukakis said. "In fairness to them, nobody anticipated this until Obama came along." ■

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