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Get on the fast track

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THE NEW ENGLAND STATES need to band together to snag a big chunk of \$8 billion in federal money for high-speed rail. A new coalition of business, environmental, and transportation groups has begun a push for rail improvements. But as the Federal Railroad Administration draws up rules for allocating the money, New England still needs a formal regional rail plan, and efforts to coordinate policies among the six states remain in their early stages.

The Patrick administration ought to take the initiative on fostering a regionwide plan. Apart from being the most populous of the six states, Massachusetts also plays host to crucial rail links to the rest of New England.

With a dense population clustered around a few large cities and many former mill towns, New England is well suited for rail travel. But limitations on current tracks mean that high-speed rail service isn't as fast as it should be - and indeed improvements to the existing Acela route are among the projects touted by the New England Regional Rail Coalition.

Other possibilities include high-speed Boston-to-Montreal service, Downeaster service farther into Maine, and, crucially, a so-called inland route from Boston to New York through Worcester, Springfield, and Hartford. Until now, there was never much money available for these projects. And as the Globe reported last week, governors in New England until recently avoided regional rail planning, for fear that the Bush administration would try to burden them with responsibility for Amtrak service.

But while other areas, including California and the region around Chicago, may have a head start in planning for high-speed rail, the competition for federal dollars is hardly a lost cause. In much of the country, a relative lack of railroad tracks and rights-of-way means that high-speed rail initiatives are far from shovel-ready. And since Senators John Kerry of Massachusetts and Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania sought the rail provision in the stimulus bill, it's fair to assume that Northeastern states are intended beneficiaries.

For its part, the Patrick administration understands the importance of rail transit. Lieutenant Governor Tim Murray has made a cause of promoting rail throughout the state. Governor Patrick's transportation plan, which lawmakers so far have stiff-armed, would use money from a gas tax in part for rail and to shore up the MBTA. In any case, New England-wide rail improvements still need forceful advocacy.

Few governors could match former governor Michael Dukakis's enthusiasm for train transportation, but Patrick should take after his Democratic predecessor's persistence on the issue. "If you're going to get anything done in the public sector," Dukakis said in an interview, "you've got to be an obsessive." ■

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