

## Group C

Case Study for February 12, 2009

### **Midwestern High-Speed Rail**

The Midwest is one of several regions in United States being considered for high-speed rail improvements as part of a nationwide rail initiative. The initiative first became a regional effort in 1996, when the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative (MWRRI) was formed out of state transportation departments, such as the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MN/DOT). Proponents of high-speed rail tout many of the *potential* benefits of a regional passenger rail system. Improved passenger rail could (PRWG 2007):

- relieve highway and airway congestion;
- improve public safety and air quality;
- reduce fuel consumption per passenger mile, potentially reducing the nation's dependence on imported oil;
- help mitigate the negative impacts of short or prolonged energy supply disruptions and energy price increases;
- provide land use and travel pattern changes that could improve air and water quality, as well as aesthetic appeal;
- provide mobility and economic development opportunities to smaller communities with little or no other access to public transport;
- assure a redundant transportation mode for use in emergency situations; and
- provide a mobility option for individuals who do not drive or fly.
- Reverse sprawl; downtown stations will pull jobs, people, and business back to the major city centers.

However, these potential benefits do not come without significant costs. The Passenger Rail Working Group (PRWG), a group of passenger rail experts and transportation professionals assembled by Congress, estimated that nationwide improvements to the passenger rail network through 2050 would cost approximately \$8.1 billion (2007 dollars) ANNUALLY in capital costs alone (PRWG 2007). The estimate included only a few corridors in California that would operate at speeds greater than 110 MPH, whereas high-speed rail in Europe operates at 125 MPH or faster (some corridors are over 200 MPH).

The MWRRI has developed a vision for high-speed rail in the Midwest that includes a spoke and hub system with feeder bus routes for maximum accessibility.

Truly high-speed rail could have major implications for regional development throughout the Midwest, as it could have the ability to truly compete with other options for mid to long-range trips. It has the potential to replace or supplement trips across the spectrum of modes and distances. If the nature of this system, in terms of monetary and time costs for the user, could be made to compete with other modes, this could forever expand the discussions in this region regarding equity of job-accessibility, among other things.

Some of the potential benefits of this network would certainly be realized, and therefore some of its purposes served, if it were built. It would increase accessibility and mobility for connected and adjacent communities. It would likely spur development at various points along the line. The degree of success of other policy purposes (reduce automobile dependency, relieve congestion) might vary and would certainly be debated. But as is often the crux of debate in transportation, it must be determined if enough value can be derived from a system like this to justify the initial and annual operating and capital costs. The amount of subsidies that this network would require, like Amtrak before it, might make this a very difficult political fight.

However, there are few examples of high-speed rail in the U.S. Most proponents point to Europe and Japan as proof that high-speed rail can be successful, but there is no telling how the American—auto centric—culture will take to such a concept. One thing is certain, both sides have legitimate arguments. On one hand, regional rail's poor ridership statistics make it difficult to justify the enormous capital costs. While, on the other, Americans face increased pressure to make significant strides away from oil dependency towards cleaner energy and transportation.

The MWRRI has been in the works for the last decade and still seeks a vote of confidence from the federal and state governments. Governmental infrastructure investments akin to the New Deal era may be called on to save a struggling national economy. We think high-speed rail projects like MWRRI could and should be part of this discussion.

“Vision for the future: U.S. intercity passenger rail network through 2050.” PRWG, 6 December 2007. <http://www.dot.state.wi.us/projects/state/docs/prwg-exec-sum.pdf>