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U.S.

High-Speed Rail in the U.S. Remains Elusive: Illinois Shows Why

A $2 billion Chicago-St. Louis project will offer a top speed of just 110 mph and shave an hour off the trip

By Shayndi Raice and Paul Overberg | Photographs by Daniel Acker for The Wall Street Journal

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Amtrak's route from Chicago to St. Louis would seem an ideal place for the U.S. to adopt high-speed rail such as in Europe and Asia, where passenger trains can race along at 200 miles an hour. The stretch in Illinois is a straight shot across mostly flat terrain.

In fact, a fast-rail project is under way in Illinois. Yet the trains will top out at 110 mph, shaving just an hour from what is now a 5½-hour train trip.

After it's finished, at a cost of about $2 billion, the state figures the share of people who travel between the two cities by rail could rise just a few percentage points.

Behind such modest gains, for hundreds of millions of dollars spent, lie some of the reasons high-speed train travel remains an elusive goal in the U.S.

The challenges faced by Illinois, among them limited federal funding and people's ingrained travel habits, mirror those faced by other states that would like to upgrade the passenger rail network.

The issue is drawing renewed attention as part of congressional Democrats' "Green New Deal" to overhaul the country's energy and transportation infrastructure. Some local governments are looking at ways to commit to reducing their carbon footprint, or to better serve an aging and urbanizing population.

Yet just last month, California's governor sharply scaled back a costly high-speed-rail project the state has been working on for years, shelving plans to provide fast passenger trains between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Illinois didn't have the money, or the right-of-way, to lay tracks that would be exclusively for a high-speed service. So its fast passenger trains will have to share the track with lumbering freight trains.

"To build the kind of infrastructure that is stand-alone—that is, just for high-speed passenger rail—it is just absurdly expensive and just takes years and years and years to get through the permitting and environmental process," said Randy Blankenhorn, who was Illinois's transportation secretary until this year.

"Land acquisition alone [would] take half a decade," he said. "If we were to have said from the beginning, right off the bat go to 200-mile-an-hour service, we'd still be in the implementing and design phase."

Illinois settled for weaving improvements along the route and rebuilding an existing single-track line that is owned by freight railroads. In effect, it chose higher-speed rail rather than actual high-speed.

The targeted 110 mph speed is well above the top of 79 mph on Amtrak's current Chicago-St. Louis Lincoln Service, yet far slower than the fastest trains abroad or even than Amtrak trains between Washington and Boston, which can reach 150 mph. In a first phase, passenger trains south of Springfield, Ill., should reach 90 mph this spring or early summer, the Illinois Department of Transportation said. It hopes the top speed of 110 mph can be achieved not long after.

California has been taking the opposite approach from Illinois's—building a passenger rail service with dedicated track. But the price tag for its long-running project rose to an estimated $77 billion. Gov. Gavin Newsom said in mid-February the ambitious plan would cost too much

and take too long, adding: “There simply isn’t a path to get from Sacramento to San Diego, let alone from San Francisco to LA.”

Mr. Newsom said work would continue on a shorter stretch of high-speed rail over dedicated track between Merced and Bakersfield. New doubts arose a week later, however, when the Trump administration said that it intended to cancel more than $900 million of planned future funding for the California rail project, and that it was exploring legal options to recover $2.5 billion of federal money already spent on it. Mr. Newsom said California would fight to keep the funds.

Amtrak’s strategic planning doesn’t focus on service over dedicated track, as in California, but on boosting some of its existing service over track that is shared with freights. An overhaul that Amtrak is preparing concentrates on increasing the frequency of intercity service, such as between Chicago and St. Louis, on the notion that rail has a better chance of competing with cars and planes in growing commercial corridors than on long-haul routes.

Back in 2009, in a federal economic-stimulus bill, Congress set aside $8 billion for high-speed passenger rail service. The Obama administration saw the funding as a pledge to build a national system.

Illinois won $1.34 billion of the stimulus bill’s money. The state then scooped $300 million more from the same pot when Ohio, Florida and Wisconsin declined funds. Illinois’s government chipped in $300 million of state money.

Illinois had been studying fast passenger-rail service since the 1990s. Its goals, stated in an environmental study, included improving traveler safety and shifting travelers away from airport and highway congestion. The project got going before the state faced a severe budget squeeze.

“It really is about more closely knitting together the economies in the Midwest with a transportation mode that is efficient, environmentally friendly and, from a business perspective, one that allows a business traveler to remain highly productive while he is moving from city to city,” said Joseph Szabo, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning and a former Federal Railroad Administrator under President Obama.

The twin cities of Bloomington-Normal, in central Illinois, are betting the improvements will be a boon to the local economy. Normal decided to abandon its old train station, which locals called “Amshack,” and invest in a multi-transportation center with new city-hall offices above, said Mayor Chris Koos. The city built a small park in front.

The Illinois rail project has consisted of making major improvements to the route on which Amtrak provides service. Work started in September 2010 and was supposed to finish in seven years. A federal mandate requiring trains to have an automatic mechanism to prevent certain

An Amtrak conductor closes the door of a passenger car.

accidents helped push back the timeline.

It has been a monumental undertaking that required dealing with railroad companies, cities and landowners, said John Oimoen, deputy director of railroads in the state transportation department. More than 300 road crossings had to have separate agreements covering upgrades or closures.

By late 2015, agency officials feared the project was dead, simply because so many deals needed to be negotiated before a deadline to spend the federal grant. The agency ultimately assigned its highway real-estate department to help finish the project.

Upgrading road crossings often meant rebuilding them, from drainage pipes up, to smooth passage for faster trains. Two extra signal arms were added to many crossings to keep drivers from going around them.

Sensors to trip signals were upgraded and moved to allow the same warning time for faster trains. In towns, sidewalks were rebuilt and gated as well. The track was fenced for the first time in many places.

The state also faced years of delays in getting new rail cars. Nippon Sharyo of Nagoya, Japan, landed a contract in 2012. Because the federal grant that funded the work required cars to be built in the U.S. from U.S.-made parts, the Japanese company expanded a 460,000-square-foot factory in Rochelle, Ill., and rebuilt its supplier network.

The company struggled to adapt designs and failed U.S. crashworthiness tests. In 2017 it withdrew from the contract and later closed the plant, meaning a side benefit Illinois hoped for —local jobs assembling rail cars—fizzled. The work moved to a Siemens AG facility in California.

A rail crossing with updated barriers in Pontiac, Ill.

Track and station construction work now is largely finished. There are six new stations, upgrades of others and dozens of rebuilt bridges and culverts. New locomotives are in service, and new railcars are due next year.

A map of the route shows some of the main results of the project.

The improvements will make the train ride faster, more comfortable and more reliable. The question is whether this will be enough to lure a large number of people out of their cars.

Heidi Verticchio takes the train a few times a week between her home in Carlinville, Ill., north of St. Louis, and Bloomington-Normal, where she directs a speech and hearing clinic for Illinois State University. Because the trains don't run frequently enough, she often has to drive the 120 miles when she needs more flexibility.

A higher speed won't mean Ms. Verticchio will be taking the train more often. She estimates it might cut 10 to 15 minutes from her ride.

"It's not going to make any difference," she said.

Most of the Chicago-St. Louis train corridor remains a single track. Freight railroads Union Pacific and Canadian National own most of the route. They coordinate all traffic, including passenger trains.

In the year that ended with November, according to an Amtrak report, Canadian National caused 1,672 minutes of delay per 10,000 Amtrak train-miles logged on the route. Union Pacific

caused 1,036 minutes of delay per 10,000 Amtrak train-miles, Amtrak said. Both exceeded Amtrak's target of 900.

The report attributed about two-thirds of the delays to "freight-train interference." It found that 73% of rail passengers arrived on time, but for those who faced delays, these averaged 45 minutes.

"Chicago is the nation's largest rail hub and as such experiences a complex and congested network," said a spokeswoman for Union Pacific. Though Union Pacific owns the line from Joliet, Ill., to St. Louis and controls movement on it, operations can be affected by other railroads as well, she said.

Train tracks snaking together outside Chicago's Union Station.

Canadian National said more than 80% of the delays were due to another railroad.

Union Pacific has agreed to get at least 80% of Amtrak's fast trains to Chicago or St. Louis on time once the project is complete. "The biggest game is reliability and on-time performance," which builds ridership over time, said John Porcari, who was deputy U.S. secretary of transportation when the Obama administration awarded funds for the project.

The Illinois project has built 24 miles of a second track, including bypasses to shunt passenger trains around freights. It's estimated that hundreds of millions of dollars would be needed to end all freight-passenger conflicts, including untangling three railroads' lines where they converge in Springfield.

Outside of regular Amtrak funding, which in 2018 was about $1.9 billion, Congress rarely provided money for intercity passenger rail prior to a 2008 bill authorizing federal grants for such projects, according to a Congressional Research Service report. The federal government awards about $3 billion a year for airport construction and $45 billion for highway construction.

Experts cite several reasons the U.S. trails similarly developed countries in high-speed rail. Chief among them are strong property rights, local land-use controls and the expense and benefits of extensive highway and aviation networks.

The renovated Amtrak waiting area at Union Station in Chicago

Robert Puentes, president of the Eno Center for Transportation in Washington, notes that the U.S. has used just one approach to passenger rail since the 1970s, Amtrak. The government-owned corporation was cobbled together from remnants of major railroads' passenger services. It is funded through fares and state and federal subsidies.

European rail networks feature a mix of government and business owners and operators. Mr. Puentes said new investor-owned passenger rail ventures in Florida and Texas bear watching.

Rail advocates say one of the biggest challenges, after all the time and expense, remains showing American travelers there can be a better alternative than driving. "We're the most car-dependent nation in the world," said Andy Kunz, president of the U.S. High Speed Rail Association, which advocates for a national high-speed rail network.

The Illinois project's 2012 environmental study found that 97.5% of the 51 million annual travelers between Chicago and St. Louis drove. Slightly over 1% of travelers flew, 0.2% took a bus, and 1.3% rode Amtrak trains.

Inside an Amtrak train outside Dwight, Ill.

Driving takes around five hours —comparable to the train—and costs about $40 for fuel, also roughly comparable to the train, where the cost now is between $25 and $70.

The state says it has a realistic goal: reducing the share of travelers who drive to 94%—at best, 90%. In 2018, Amtrak reported that the corridor's five daily trains in each direction carried 716,544 riders, about the same as 2017.

Barbara Reynolds, 79, recently took the Chicago-to-St. Louis train for the first time, on a visit to her son. Usually she flies.

Would shaving an hour off the 5½-hour train trip make much difference to her? Not really, she said. "You usually end up waiting somewhere for an hour."

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Corrections & Amplifications

Passenger rail projects under way on Vancouver-Eugene and Milwaukee-Chicago routes don't aim for a top speed to 90 miles an hour. A map with an earlier version of this article incorrectly indicated they did. (March 4, 2019)

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Passengers leave an Amtrak Lincoln Service train at Union Station in Chicago.

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