

Amtrak boss: Reduced travel time is key

Written by Jon Hilkevitch - Chicago Tribune

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CHICAGO — Introducing ultra-fast passenger trains to the Midwest is less important than the need for more frequent service between cities, reliable schedules that beat the time spent driving and rail connections that permit travel across the United States, Amtrak's chief official said today in Chicago.

True high-speed rail clipping along at 200 m.p.h. or faster would be prohibitively expensive to build on the scale needed to serve the U.S., and such systems work best only when the number of stops are limited, Joseph Boardman, president and chief executive officer of Amtrak, told Illinois lawmakers at a hearing in the Thompson Center on the passenger railroad's agenda.

"It's really not about the speed. It's about reduced travel times and more frequency," he told the Illinois House Railroad Industry Committee. "The competitive advantage is with the train."

Boardman said plans in the Midwest for trains traveling up to 110 m.p.h. on corridors stretching over nine states make more sense. He said the immediate focus must be on modernizing infrastructure to increase train speeds in the Chicago area that currently are as slow as 5 m.p.h. because of freight-train congestion and antiquated track and signaling equipment.

Getting up to even 40 m.p.h. on stretches between Chicago and cities less than 50 miles away, such as Joliet, would be a big improvement, Boardman said.

"One hundred and ten is double the national speed limit" of 55 m.p.h. on highways, noted Boardman, who served as administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration during several years of the Bush administration.

"The key to going fast is to not go slow," added Tom Carper, chairman of the Amtrak board and a former mayor of the Downstate city of Macomb.

A proposed 3,000-mile high-speed rail network using Chicago as the hub is in the running for a share of \$13 billion in federal investment over the next five years. The network, estimated to cost at least \$8 billion to build, would serve major Midwestern cities from Chicago, including St. Louis, Detroit, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Cleveland and Louisville.

The U.S. Department of Transportation is expected to start awarding grants in September to develop high-speed corridors. About a dozen projects, including the Midwest initiative, are competing.

The idea in the Midwest is to operate comfortable trains with wide seats and large windows at 110 m.p.h. instead of the current top speed of 79 m.p.h. in most places, shaving hours off trips and delivering passengers from one downtown to another hundreds of miles away.

The current travel time of about 5 1/2 hours between Chicago and St. Louis would be cut to four

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hours or less, according to the Illinois Department of Transportation.

IDOT and the Union Pacific Railroad, which owns the majority of track between Chicago and St. Louis, agreed last week to develop a plan for high-speed passenger service between the two cities, the first Midwest pairing for high-speed trains.

Illinois has already invested about \$143 million along a small section of the 284-mile corridor for high-speed service.

In addition to Amtrak operating faster trains, service would be increased under the agreement to eight round trips daily, up from five round trips now.