

Cities and states race to cancel high-speed rail fiascos

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=5003>

Despite Obama's proposal to spend \$53 billion on high-speed rail, the fact that our nation's debt just exceeded its GDP and states like Wisconsin are fighting unions and an AWOL Congress, we are seeing glimpses of sanity here and there.

One of those is New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, who recently cancelled the \$8.7 billion Hudson River tunnel project because it was over budget. His advisors estimated that the cost of constructing the tunnel could have cost over \$14 billion. Christie cited Boston's "Big Dig" that cost nearly ten times its original estimated cost of \$2.8 billion as an example of what he wanted to prevent.

We can see another glimpse of sanity in the state of Florida, where newly elected Gov. Rick Scott has recently cancelled a high speed rail line that was to have linked Tampa with Orlando. Scott rejected \$2.4 billion in federal funds to build the rail line because it posed a substantial risk to Florida taxpayers who would have been forced to pay for cost overruns that are typical for this type of project.

Projections indicated that the overruns could have exceeded the initial estimates by another \$3 billion. Scott was also concerned that ridership estimates were too optimistic and that the state would have been forced to subsidize the rail line to keep it operating.

The most looming risk to the state was that if the rail line did not perform to a certain level, it might be forced to refund the \$2.4 billion grant back to the federal government.

Proponents for the rail line are not accepting Scott's rejection without a fight. Immediately after Scott's announcement, they began looking for ways to circumvent the governor.

According to an article in the Miami Herald, Democrat Sen. Bill Nelson said, "We have DOT lawyers now researching to see how we can work around the governor's decision." The same article stated that lawmakers from New York and California were trying to get the funds that Scott rejected.

Florida has the fourth highest population in the nation, and until recently has traditionally been a growing state. But now it is losing population as its high unemployment numbers are forcing many residents to leave.

Last year, Florida's condominium market was hit hard by a falling (actually, plummeting) median price. In 2007, the median condo price was \$367,000, but last year it had fallen to \$82,500.

I have also heard firsthand about how dead the economy is in Florida, especially in rural areas. Most people think of Florida as a tourist and retirement state, which it is, but agriculture is a big part of the state's economy. The Tampa-Orlando line would have done nothing for it.

Scott has also frozen funding for a 61-mile long commuter rail transit project that was to serve a four-county area at Orlando. It was projected to cost \$1.2 billion, and there was concern that cost overruns would lead to shifting highway funds from road construction and maintenance to subsidizing the rail system.

High-speed rail and light rail are outrageously expensive to build and operate and they are routinely marketed with low estimates of cost and high estimates of ridership. In Florida, Governor Jeb Bush cancelled a rail project in 1999 for the same reasons that Scott is now, but proponents of rail transit have continued to push hard for it.

To be sure, Florida is a great place to visit, and a great place to retire, but economically the state is in big trouble. Governor Scott has done the right thing for Florida by canceling this project. Doing so will allow the state to focus on rebuilding its economy without the burden that unneeded rail lines would impose.

Oklahoma may be better off than most states, but we are still in a fiscal crisis. One advantage, among many, that it has over other states is that it has not yet made the big investment in rail projects that other states have.

We also have the ability to look at other things that other states have done - such as smart growth and development regulation - to see the resulting economic devastation, and to benefit from their experience without suffering it ourselves.

That is an invaluable gift that I hope our governor, legislators and city leaders will recognize. The allure of rail projects is high because it is an intoxicating status symbol, because there is so much money involved (including the opportunity for corruption), and because of the false promise it makes for taking cars off the road.

My hope is that Oklahoma (and especially Tulsa) will have the fortitude to resist developing the albatross that rail transit is.

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