

# EARTH TALK™

**Questions & Answers About Our Environment**

**Dear EarthTalk:** Vice-President Joe Biden just announced a commitment by the Obama administration of \$53 billion to high-speed rail. Isn't it about time? Why is the U.S. so far behind other nations in developing environmentally friendly public transportation? -- Diane A., Boston, MA

There are many reasons why public transit hasn't taken off in the U.S. as it has in parts of Asia, Europe and elsewhere. For one, ever since the Model T first rolled off Henry Ford's assembly line, Americans have had a love affair with cars.

Also, a successful plot by General Motors and several partner companies in the 1930 and 1940s bought up and shut down rail transit lines across 45 American cities, replacing them with bus routes driven on GM buses.

Meanwhile, the U.S. government embarked on a plan to link the nation's metro areas via interstate highways, further encouraging car travel. The sexy new car designs of the 1950s then drove the final nail in the coffin, relegating public transportation to an afterthought.

But with rising oil prices and growing fears about global warming, public transit is looking sexier to many Americans. As part of 2009's landmark American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), the White House commit-

ted \$8 billion to efforts to create and maintain high-speed intercity passenger rail service.

And just weeks ago, after calling for giving 80 percent of Americans access to high-speed rail within 25 years, Barack Obama pledged another \$53 billion to increase the nation's network of high-speed rail lines.

Plans to expand high-speed rail service are already underway in several U.S. regions. Illinois was the first of 31 states to receive a portion of the funding to begin building high-speed rail lines linking Chicago and St. Louis.

A recent report found that high-speed rail in the Midwest would reduce air travel by 1.3 million trips and car travel by 5.1 million trips per year by 2020, saving 188,000 tons of carbon dioxide emissions (equivalent to taking 34,000 cars off the road while still getting everyone to and from work).

Funding is also slated to go to California, where trains traveling up to 220 miles per hour will move people between San Diego and San Francisco in less than three hours. California's high-speed rail system, which should be in service by 2020, is expected to cost about half as much as would expanding highways and building new airport runways and gates to accommodate fast growing passenger transportation demand.

Not everyone is on board with high-speed rail. Florida's Republican governor Rick Scott recently rejected \$2 billion in federal funding to build an 85-mile high-speed rail line between Tampa and Orlando, arguing that cost overruns would likely leave Florida taxpayers making up billions of dollars for something they don't need.

Scott's move in killing the Tampa-Orlando run calls into question whether or not Obama can push his plans through in other parts of the country that are also conservative strongholds.



Plans to expand high-speed rail service are now underway in several U.S. regions. Pictured: High speed trains at the St. Pancras international station, London. (Photo courtesy John Curnow, Flickr)

No matter how quickly Americans get up to speed on high-speed rail, the U.S. certainly has some catching up to do. According to statistics from the International Union of Railways and other sources, China leads the world with upwards of 2,800 miles of high-speed rail lines in operation and another 5,500 miles planned.

Spain, France and Japan each have around 1,200 miles in operation; Germany has 800 miles and Italy has 577. The U.S. has only 226 miles in operation currently. The Obama administration would like to see Americans riding on more than 16,000 miles of high-speed rail lines by the middle of the century.

**CONTACTS:** ARRA, [www.recovery.gov](http://www.recovery.gov); International Union of Railways, [www.uic.org](http://www.uic.org).

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