

2. POLICY POSITION

PROMOTING HIGH-SPEED RAIL IN THE SOUTHERN STATES

BACKGROUND

In recent decades, while high-speed rail made tremendous strides in parts of Asia and Europe, rail travel in the United States languished. However, this scenario is in the process of undergoing a radical transformation as a result of efforts initiated by the Obama Administration to include \$13 billion (\$8 billion in the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009* (ARRA) along with an additional \$5 billion spread over the next five years) as seed money to fund up to 11 high-speed rail corridors connecting densely populated areas of the country. While these funds remain far from sufficient to introduce a comprehensive high-speed rail system in our nation, they are a critical first step in this direction.

Based on these federal initiatives, this renewed focus on 21st century rail travel in the United States has a range of positive outcomes. For instance, focusing on the more populated areas of the country will ensure greater efficiencies as people (and some goods) move more quickly between the nation's major population centers. Reducing the number of vehicles from the nation's highways will reduce congestion while lowering the emission of carbon monoxide into the environment, along with reducing air pollution and our dependence on imported oil. Finally, the research and development, construction and subsequent maintenance of these high-speed rail systems will lead to a host of direct and indirect economic benefits that would spur economic growth in the relevant cities and adjacent areas.

The Obama Administration has indicated several deadlines for states and regions to apply for federal funds under the ARRA, with August 24, 2009 (final application) looming as important in this initial round. Federal officials noted that projects with established revenue sources and multistate cooperation efforts already identified would be front runners to secure federal funding.

As Congress and the administration discuss the optimal approach to authorize new federal transportation legislation—currently set to expire on September 30, 2009—it is evident that there continues to be a great deal of interest in continuing this federal role in both funding and encouraging the expansion of high-speed rail corridors across the United States. Specifically, the proposal submitted by Congressman James L. Oberstar, Minnesota, chair of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure (*The Surface Transportation Authorization Act of 2009: A Blueprint for Investment and Reform*) for review and discussion by the different stakeholders provides \$50 billion over six years to develop the aforementioned 11 high-speed rail corridors.

RECOMMENDATION

The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments recommends that states work cooperatively where appropriate to enter into multistate agreements and interstate compacts to enhance the potential for federal high-speed rail funding. The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments also recommends that states work proactively to create public-private partnerships to promote the development, improvement and expansion of both existing and new rail lines, where applicable, alongside creating specific economic incentives to achieve this important objective. Finally, the Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments encourages the Southern states to work with the entire range of stakeholders in this process including officials with AMTRAK, private railroad companies and other related organizations to promote high-speed rail both in the Southern states and across the country.