

# Speed thrills, but performance wins

By Chris Taylor, for *Railway Age*

Woody Allen once said, “I took a speed-reading course and read War and Peace in twenty minutes. It involves Russia.” Speed is compelling. From restaurant service to medical treatment, we use speed to define quality. Transportation is no exception. But as Allen illustrates, by focusing solely on speed you can miss other essential elements. U.S. passenger rail is a case in point.

Headlines often blare about the speed of European or Asian high speed trains. But those vaunted speeds are rarely sustained in practice, due to operating costs, logistic constraints, and maintenance requirements. The unspoken story is overall performance—efficient, reliable, and comfortable ways of getting passengers to their destinations, using rail as one well-integrated component of an overall journey. But performance can be hard to define and even harder to quantify. Speed becomes the defining principle by default. Unfortunately, U.S. passenger rail cannot afford to live by that definition. To advance passenger rail here, advocates should focus on high-performance rail (HPR).

Things are different on this continent, and headlong implementation of European or Asian-style HSR may not be the best strategic choice for us. Different transportation corridors have unique needs and constraints. Choosing appropriate rail solutions by corridor is the key to our successful implementation of passenger rail. Appropriate phasing is critical to deliver early, visible gains and long-term potential. Credit the Obama Administration and the FRA for embracing that principle. Modifying the original High Speed Rail Strategic Plan, the FRA now recognizes three corridor categories: Core Express, 125 mph or faster; Regional, 90–125 mph; and Emerging, below 90 mph.

This refocus is practical. Passenger rail is not a one-size-fits-all business. From political realities to legislative and budget constraints to market-capture issues, unique corridor conditions prevail throughout the U.S. Recognizing these complexities, the FRA has endorsed HPR for passenger rail. What exactly is HPR?

HPR is an approach that delivers an appropriate rail system for each market, and measures that system in terms of ride quality, frequency, reliability, safety, ontime performance, amenities, station environments, local transit and airport connectivity, and yes, speed. Using these criteria collectively puts rail in a new light. Rather than being a foreign, elitist, or extravagant expense, it becomes an attractive, effective, and affordable transportation alternative. Passenger rail can thus be transformed from an abstract indulgence to an urgent local priority.

HPR optimizes solutions by addressing the needs and constraints of individual corridors. In one corridor, 90–110 mph on a shared freight asset may be best. In the Northeast Corridor (where the existing system already operates at capacity), a separate, dedicated HSR system is preferable. In other corridors, new commuter service on existing freight assets might be the optimal solution (and HSR could develop later, once ridership is established).

HPR is also cost-effective—an important consideration since infrastructure funding is limited and the competition for funds is intense. Money is especially tight for major capital projects like HSR, for obvious reasons. For most Americans, HSR is a distant, theoretical construct. At full build-out, it would only capture a

small share of the overall travel market. Taxpayers are reluctant to fund a system they perceive as “fast trains for businesspeople and tourists.”

Such perceptions have unfairly damaged the case for HSR; that small overall share is a critical, large share in key corridors, and HSR would free up capacity in other elements of the larger multimodal transportation network. HPR mitigates the perception problem by focusing on performance, efficiency, and corridor-appropriate solutions that benefit everyone. We need passenger rail travel to become a reality again for many taxpayers. And once the country accepts HPR, the step up to HSR will be easier.

Speed is compelling. But it is not always the best criterion. In truth, most transportation modes actually “sell” performance. Airlines never talk about how fast their planes fly, but they are expert at selling performance—legroom, in-flight movies, airport lounges, and so forth. We must bring that perspective to passenger rail by promoting HPR. By taking a holistic approach to rail, by shrewdly and fairly apportioning limited funds, the FRA is, in effect, advocating high-performance rail.

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