



Advancing High Speed Rail Policy in the United States

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This report investigates the current state of high-speed rail (HSR) policy in the US, juxtaposing it against HSR experience in Asia and Europe. The purpose is to identify basic steps that must be put in place if a HSR system is to be developed in the US.

HSR agencies should place a high priority on working closely with political leaders and engaging the public.

Study Methods

This report is based on literature reviews and interviews with key high-speed rail experts in the US. The literature review of international experience with high-speed rail examined the experiences of Korea, Taiwan, China and several countries in Europe. In addition to a literature review of ongoing US projects, the researchers interviewed the staff of the Florida and California high-speed rail development agencies, as well as key high-speed rail experts in the US.

Findings

Korea and Taiwan view HSR as a means to relieve congestion on their conventional rail and road networks. Europe has used HSR to relieve congestion on its conventional rail lines by providing additional capacity with improved quality of service and, in some cases, to spur economic development. China is using HSR to stimulate economic development and to free up capacity in its rail network for freight train use. The US, on the other hand, is still attempting to justify HSR development.

Some key reasons to advocate for HSR in Europe and Asia do not make as strong a case in the US. For example, because the US has a well-developed interstate highway system and an extensive airport network, intercity travel congestion is not yet at critical levels. In the US, freight companies own most of the rail track, so there is no pressing need for government intervention to free up capacity for freight operations.

Although congestion levels are not at unbearable levels, additional transportation capacity will be needed to support growing population and economic activity in the future. HSR will be a key option to address this need. According to the research, the US continues to lack a firm HSR policy framework because it has not developed the key compelling arguments that politicians can support for HSR development. On-time reliability, improved speeds (shorter travel times), and HSR safety are among the most compelling arguments for HSR in the US.

Policy Recommendations

HSR projects are multi-billion dollar initiatives that take more than ten years to construct. For the US to develop an effective program, it must move away from the current ad-hoc process

into a more structured one. At the federal level, the following is necessary:

- A clearly designated agency with a legislative mandate to plan, develop, and manage the HSR program
- An agency staffed with experts in project and financial management and experience building HSR projects, given the high level of capital involved
- A dedicated funding source because states do not have budgets to fund construction, and private capital sources consider the risks too high to invest at the early stage
- A massive program launched by the federal government so it can have more leverage in negotiating with foreign firms and agencies that currently possess HSR technology
- An urgent need to begin HSR projects soon if they are to help meet future projected transportation capacity

The challenge for the states is to sustain support and funding for their projects. The former is even more critical than the latter. Specifically:

- States still in the planning stages must work closely with other states such as Florida and California to learn from their successes and setbacks
- State projects should have a legislative act/instrument in place early in the process
- HSR agencies should place a high priority on working closely with political leaders and engaging the public. Several states have had their HSR plans derailed with changing administrations and shifting public opinions
- Given their limited budgets, states should put in place a detailed, realistic financing plan while attracting private capital as early as possible



About the Authors

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To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/2905.html