

High-speed train not arriving soon (The News Journal)

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High-speed train not arriving soon

Castle, federal officials discuss faster rail service between New York, D.C.

By MIKE CHALMERS

The News Journal

Wanted: good ideas about how to build a high-speed train line between New York City and Washington, D.C.

U.S. Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., joined other federal officials and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg on Monday to take one of the first steps toward building such a service, which could cost at least \$14 billion and be more than a decade away. The federal Department of Transportation issued a "request for proposals" and set a deadline of September 2009.

The officials spoke at Penn Station in New York City, then Castle rode the Amtrak train to Wilmington and spoke to the media again.

Such a service would help ease congestion and pollution concerns along the I-95 corridor, Castle said. It would also create jobs and provide a model for other high-speed rail services in the country, he said.

Castle said the proposals must include provisions for a stop in Wilmington, though whether that is actually part of a final system would be determined later. Castle, who begins his ninth term in January, joked that he won't be making the commute to Washington by the time the train is in service.

Amtrak's Acela train now travels an average of 83 mph and makes the trip between New York City and Washington in about two hours and 45 minutes. That's pokey compared to high-speed trains in France, Japan and China, which travel 125 mph to 350 mph.

The idea for a new high-speed line here would be to cut the travel time to two hours, which would require speeds of 150 mph or faster.

Leonid Kouperschmidt said he takes the Acela train between New York City and Washington three or four times a year as part of his job as vice president of international sales for URALSIB, a Russian financial holding company. A train that would cut the travel time by almost a third would be a boon to business travelers, he said.

"For those who live in New York or Washington, it would make sense," Kouperschmidt said. "For everyone else, it probably wouldn't make much difference."

The federal Department of Transportation has until April 2010 to evaluate the various proposals and submit its recommendation to Congress.

Castle said it's unknown exactly how much money such a service would cost to build and operate. U.S. Rep. John L. Mica, R-Fla., Republican leader of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, said in May it would cost at least \$14 billion to build high-speed rail lines, new tunnels and new bridges.

"We're talking about a very expensive part of the country when you look at building rail lines and bridges and tunnels," Castle said Monday.

Tony DeSantis, president of the Delaware Valley Association of Rail Passengers, said federal money could be better spent adding rail lines and bridges to the current network and connecting the regional rail systems of Maryland and Philadelphia.

"There's plenty of ridership demand, but there's nothing to deal with it," DeSantis said. "If you had cheap trains, that would give you more public use."

Private businesses have no incentive to build a high-speed rail system because costs are so high, DeSantis said.

To make it work, the federal and state governments should take over the construction and maintenance costs of the rail lines, then encourage private companies to operate services on them, he said. Such a model is already used on interstate highways and air-travel routes.

Tom Posatko, president of the Delmarva Rail Passenger Association, said Amtrak's Northeast Corridor is the best place to try high-speed service because it is busy and profitable.

"It will be interesting to see what kind of replies they get," Postako said.

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