

[youtube=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJhM3BpBPp8] Fresh from a State of the Union Address that focused heavily on domestic economic issues, President Obama and Vice President Biden journeyed to Tampa, Florida last week to announce federal support-and \$8 billion in government funding-for high speed rail projects across the country. That's a most welcome development.

American train buffs who've traveled in Europe and Japan marvel at the "bullet trains" that transport passengers between cities there at speeds of over 200 mph. Those high-speed rail facilities stand in sharp contrast to this country's intercity passenger railroad system, which declined precipitously over the last half of the 20th century, as America's interstate highway and passenger aviation systems became the preeminent way of moving travelers between American cities. In recent years, however, concerns over U.S. over-dependence on fossil fuels, greenhouse gas emissions, security issues and the growing inconvenience of airline travel have converged to make high-speed rail an increasingly attractive alternative.

The federal government's newly-announced \$8 billion in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act grant awards is designed to lay the groundwork for a national high-speed rail network, and responds to some \$55 billion in grant requests from states and regional rail authorities. The Obama Administration concurrently touts this federal funding as a means of helping to jump-start the still-sluggish American economy through a massive, new public works program.

The big winner in last week's high-speed rail grant competition? California, which received \$2.9 billion. That's due to the fact that the Golden State is farther along in its goal of creating an intrastate high-speed rail system than any other state in the nation. In 2008, California voters approved a \$9 billion state bond act to begin construction of a high-speed rail system to connect Northern California's Bay Area with Southern California population centers in Los Angeles, Orange County and San Diego. That project is now well-underway, with [California's High Speed Rail Authority](#) now finalizing the rail route and completing environmental review under NEPA and California's little NEPA statute.

While public infrastructure improvements generally don't generate much political buzz or public interest, the federal government's commitment to high-speed rail may be an exception. High-speed rail represents good transportation policy combined with sound environmental policy, wrapped in a strong economic stimulus package.

All aboard!