

President Obama has announced a commitment to high speed rail, envisioning a network that could:

connect areas like the cities of the Pacific Northwest; southern and central Florida; the Gulf Coast to the Southeast to our nation's capital; the breadth of Pennsylvania and New York to the cities of New England; and something close to my heart, a central hub network that draws the cities of our industrial heartland closer to Chicago and one another.

In the [Washington Post](#) today, Robert Samuelson attacks this vision as a pipe dream, relying on a [blog posting](#) by economist Edward Glaeser. Samuelson seems to be politically motivated since he trumpets this as evidence that the White House "cannot be believed when it professes concern about future taxes and budget deficits." But this doesn't mean that his criticisms should be ignored.

Glaeser's [analysis](#) appears plausible in some ways, but he also makes some strange choices, like focusing on a hypothetical Dallas-Houston connection because he views it as "average" among the various proposed projects. So his analysis doesn't seem to exclude the possibility that some high speed routes may make a lot of sense even if the majority do not. He also indicates that a key parameter is the interest rate but doesn't explain his choice.

Glaeser seems to have an anti-government bias ("the public must be wary every time our leaders decide to spend billions of our tax dollars.") Also, one of his big claims to fame was his [argument](#) that there was no housing bubble and that high housing prices were just attributable to overregulation of land use by the government. So I'm not prepared to defer just because he's a Harvard economist.

The bottom line is that I'd like to see more analysis of high speed rail, focusing on the most favorable settings to see if the project is worth pursuing. Glaeser raises some serious questions but seems far from definitive. I'd love to hear from readers who know more than I do about this issue.

An interesting [critique](#) of Samuelson's views:

"Densities are much higher, and high densities favor rail with direct connections between heavily populated city centers and business

districts. In Japan, density is 880 people per square mile; it's 653 in Britain, 611 in Germany and 259 in France. By contrast, plentiful land in the United States has led to suburbanized homes, offices and factories. Density is 86 people per square mile.”

The density for the United States as a whole would be relevant if the plans were to build a train network going from Florida to Alaska, but that is not what is on the agenda. Instead, the issue is about deepening and improving the network in relatively densely populated parts of the country, like Ohio (277 people per square mile), New York (402), and New Jersey (1134). The population densities of much of the United States are very comparable to the regions in Europe through which high speed rails travel.