

Obama's vision: a US network

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In April 2009, President Barack Obama outlined his ambitions for the biggest investment in infrastructure in America since President Eisenhower initiated the inter-state highway system in the 1950s. He committed his government 'not just to upgrade and maintain our aging highway and aviation systems, but to build a world-class network of high speed passenger rail corridors.'

In Obama's vision, the USA is to have a 'transportation system fit for the needs of a 21st Century'. Drawing the attention of Congress to the economic benefits high speed rail has brought to Japan, France and Spain, Obama also compared China's rapid progress with high speed rail development — China will have built more high speed rail corridors in five years' time than any other country.

The High Speed Strategic Plan announced in April set out a process by which states, groups of states or other entities could compete for money from the federal government to develop individual rail projects or corridor rail programmes. This is the first time that the US government has made money available for the development of high speed passenger rail, driving the budget from zero to over \$8bn in just two years.

Evidence of the aspiration for rail investment was quickly demonstrated when the Federal Railroad Administration announced it had received 278 pre-applications seeking \$102bn of funding under the stimulus arrangement. In July, the appetite for pushing ahead with high speed rail plans was truly evident when Congress approved a further \$4bn a year for the next five years in a transport spending bill; this decision has yet to be agreed by the Senate — Obama had asked for an extra \$1bn a year.

The Strategic Plan was followed in mid-June by the FRA issuing detailed guidance for applications and procedures in the competition for high speed rail funding. To accommodate the variety of applicant goals and stages of project development, the

FRA guidance provides four funding tracks:

- **Track 1 – Projects:** Provide grants to complete individual projects that are 'ready to go' with preliminary engineering and environmental work completed. The federal funding share can be up to 100%.
- **Track 2 – Programmes:** Develop entire phases or geographic sections of high speed rail corridors that have completed corridor plans, environmental documentation and have a prioritised list of projects to help meet the corridor objectives. Federal shares for projects under this track can also be up to 100%.
- **Track 3 – Planning:** Enter into co-operative agreements for planning activities in order to create the corridor programme and project pipeline needed to fully develop a high speed rail network. Planning activities funded under this Track require a 50% non-federal match.
- **Track 4 – FY2009 Appropriations-Funded Projects:** Track 4 provides an alternative to Track 1 for applicants able to contribute at least 50% of the project cost. This Track offers applicants simplified grant agreement terms, and up to five years to complete projects compared with two years under Track 1.

Securing funding and federal support for high speed rail investment and projects is likely to be a hard-fought and high-profile affair. In November 2008, Californian voters approved nearly \$10bn in state bonds that could be combined with federal and private-sector investment to build nearly 1 300 km of high speed lines. Elsewhere, planning in both the 10 federally designated High Speed Rail Corridors and in other regions has been progressing as Obama's vision acts as a catalyst to bring organisations together to define and finalise their strategies.

For its part, the FRA has set out a three-stage process for reviewing applications. This takes into account their eligibility, the public return on investment and the project's success factors which include sustainability of benefits and the timescale for completion.

Projects shortlisted from this evaluation will be selected for funding by comparative assessment against criteria that includes regional and location

considerations, the degree of innovation and US industrial development and project costs and schedules. The first announcements about qualifying projects are due to be made later this year.

It is widely recognised that, notwithstanding the considerable funding made available for high speed rail under the government's initiative, it is just a 'down payment' against the full costs of developing a US high speed rail system. As part of the discussion of the USDoT surface transport multi-year funding framework, a congressional committee recently proposed authorising \$50bn from general government revenues for high speed rail development.

Until now, high speed rail travel in the USA has been limited to the relatively modest Acela Express service in the corridor between Washington DC and Boston. High speed rail may finally be ready to play a more central role in the US transport spectrum. ☐

High speed facts:

- Maximum speed of Amtrak's Acela Express in the Northeast Corridor is 240 km/h.
- Around 25 corridors totalling nearly 25 000 route-km have been identified as potential inter-city networks serving 93 of the largest 100 metropolitan areas in the USA.

Acela Express trains reach 240 km/h on parts of the Washington – New York – Boston corridor.

