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**Upstate NY: The Case for High Speed Rail**

As the country turns to a period of infrastructure-heavy capital gains projects, the case for high-speed rail along the Upstate New York Empire Corridor is stronger than ever. New York has focused its transportation infrastructure improvement efforts on high-density urban transit, causing intercity rail systems to become progressively more outdated. The 2009 American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) has allocated national funding for high-speed rail and several New York politicians have begun to advocate for New York to be the recipient of said funding. The benefits of this investment could help the state lessen the burden of demand on the already stretched transit system, bringing a much-needed economic boost to the upstate region, and give riders a faster, greener option for traveling between New York City and Upstate. Not only is New York State exceptionally well-suited to this development, its upstate regions could gain a great deal from the construction of this efficient rail system.

President Obama articulated in April of 2009 that his stimulus package would detail \$8 billion for high-speed rail that would be spend in a two-year period and an additional billion dollars per year to be allocated toward the project.<sup>1</sup> Of the ten locations competing for high-speed rail funding, the Empire line that runs East-to-West across upstate New York, is perhaps the most viable and easily achieved project.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/17/us/politics/17train.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/17/us/politics/17train.html?_r=1)

Rail came to the state in 1831 with the New York and Harlem Railroad, which came into the city at 4<sup>th</sup> Ave. and 23<sup>rd</sup> St.<sup>2</sup> As a conduit for commercial shipping and passenger travel, this vital system still connects the hub to outlying regions today. Currently, a trip from Syracuse to NYC via Amtrak takes seven hours.<sup>3</sup> With high-speed rail, the trip would be roughly half of that- as little as three hours and forty-five minutes.<sup>4</sup> These saved hours mean several things for New York: They make the Upstate labor market far more easily accessible, make daytrips for Upstate businesspeople a viable option, and incentivize the more environmentally-friendly option of train usage over pollution-intense automobile travel.

Japan introduced its first bullet train for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and now more than 150 million people use the “bullet train” between Tokyo and Osaka each year.<sup>5</sup> Internationally, the United States is lagging behind its European peers in the field of high speed rail. Spain’s new AVE line –which Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood has visited on a fact-finding mission- has been so successful that it is even turning an operating profit.<sup>6</sup> A local Spanish Chamber of Commerce President, Mr. Manuel Teruel, finds of the project that the high speed rail line increases small business productivity in the suburbs, as businesspeople no longer were forced to spend the night in Madrid (thereby cutting down on time and money spent traveling) for business meetings.<sup>7</sup> This situation could be easily paralleled with upstate businesspeople going into New York.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://grandcentralterminal.com/info/railroad.cfm>

<sup>3</sup> [http://tickets.amtrak.com/itd/amtrak/FareFinder?\\_tripType=OneWay&\\_origin=Syracuse&\\_depmonthyear=2009&\\_depday=13&\\_dephourmin=&\\_destination=NYC&\\_retmonthyear=&\\_retday=&\\_rethourmin=&\\_adults=1&\\_children=0&\\_infants=0&\\_searchBy=schedule&x=18&y=13](http://tickets.amtrak.com/itd/amtrak/FareFinder?_tripType=OneWay&_origin=Syracuse&_depmonthyear=2009&_depday=13&_dephourmin=&_destination=NYC&_retmonthyear=&_retday=&_rethourmin=&_adults=1&_children=0&_infants=0&_searchBy=schedule&x=18&y=13)

<sup>4</sup> [http://blog.syracuse.com/green/2009/07/ny\\_has\\_high\\_hopes\\_for\\_highspeed.html](http://blog.syracuse.com/green/2009/07/ny_has_high_hopes_for_highspeed.html)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/aug/05/high-speed-rail-japan>

<sup>6</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8268003.stm>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Upstate NY has struggled, as has the rest of the country, with increasing unemployment- in March 2009, the unemployment rate in Buffalo rose from 7.2 percent to 9 percent over a single month.<sup>8</sup> A high-speed rail line has the potential to open up the labor market to a greater geographic area. In support of the project, Syracuse Mayor Matt Driscoll said that it “will do something that New York state needs to do, and that is balance its business portfolio...we are so heavily dependent on Wall Street. The model needs to be expanded so we are not so dependent on one area of the state.”<sup>9</sup> That small businesses in Syracuse, Buffalo, Albany, and Rochester would have greater access to the economic hub of New York City has enormous potential implications for economic growth and recovery. Each stop along the line would receive an economic boost in construction costs and an increased number of travelers either coming to passing through it.

Environmentally, the project’s main advantage is that it takes noxious gas-producing vehicles off the road. Aside from saving tons upon tons of automobile pollution, the project also has hidden benefits. For example Rep. Michael Arcuri, D-Utica cites the ability for garbage trucks carrying waste from New York City to Auburn to be substituted by freight rail, lessening highway repair and maintenance costs and eliminating traffic hazards.<sup>10</sup> The amount of Volatile Organic Compounds (VOC), carbon monoxide (CO), and nitrous oxides released into the atmosphere would be sizably decreased; in a similar study done the Midwest High Speed Rail Association, it was found that a 110-mph train would release 0.084 tons of VOC, 0.703 tons of CO, and

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<sup>8</sup> [http://blogs.buffalonews.com/inside\\_the\\_news/2009/03/local-jobless-rate-jumps-to-a-scary-level.html?cid=6a00d83451b85a69e2011168c5f004970c#comment-6a00d83451b85a69e2011168c5f004970c](http://blogs.buffalonews.com/inside_the_news/2009/03/local-jobless-rate-jumps-to-a-scary-level.html?cid=6a00d83451b85a69e2011168c5f004970c#comment-6a00d83451b85a69e2011168c5f004970c)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2009/02/upstate\\_new\\_york\\_may\\_finally\\_g.html](http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2009/02/upstate_new_york_may_finally_g.html)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2009/02/upstate\\_new\\_york\\_may\\_finally\\_g.html](http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2009/02/upstate_new_york_may_finally_g.html)

1.214 tons of nitrous oxides every million miles traveled as opposed to the 0.703, 5.981, and 1.955 tons that would be released by automotive travel.<sup>11</sup> The group also found that this project could decrease annual trucking emissions, traffic congestion, and consumer fuel consumption.

The plans outlined for Upstate NY would first focus on the linkage of Albany and Buffalo, by way of Syracuse and Rochester. Then, the high-speed track would dip southward at Albany and connect to New York City. The 430-mile long Empire Rail Corridor would run alongside the existing track.<sup>12</sup> The current Amtrak railroad track runs from Albany to Niagara Falls, making stops at Schenectady, Utica, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo. As is, the passenger rail shares the track with the shipping company CSX, which caps passenger rail speeds at 79 mph.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, Senator Charles Schumer has requested the construction of a third, separate track exclusively for high-speed passenger rail.<sup>14</sup> In this unique situation, there is a single owner of all of the land that the rail tracks would be laid on-CSX. Thus, this agreement marked a crucial step toward moving the development forward. Schumer secured a commitment from their CEO to cooperate with high-speed rail efforts alongside the existing freight track.

Critics of the plan claim that the project will push freight onto the roadways, that Europeans and Japanese riders don't use high-speed rail, that ridership is unreliable, that travelers will be inconvenienced, and that the capital cost will never be gained back.<sup>15</sup> These claims are wholly untrue. Not only will the project increase freight rail infrastructure, but the French TGV also carries 90 million riders annually, while the

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.midwesthsr.org/benefits/environment.html>

<sup>12</sup> [http://schumer.senate.gov/new\\_website/record.cfm?id=310482](http://schumer.senate.gov/new_website/record.cfm?id=310482)

<sup>13</sup> [http://schumer.senate.gov/new\\_website/record.cfm?id=316815](http://schumer.senate.gov/new_website/record.cfm?id=316815)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.midwesthsr.org/fact/index.html>

Japanese high-speed rail system has seen 6 billion rides since its inception.<sup>16</sup> The existing U.S. Acela trains are currently covering their operating costs.<sup>17</sup>

Senator Schumer has exercised strong leadership on this issue and has made high speed rail one of his top transportation priorities. The Senator has taken multiple steps towards realizing this goal. In late March of this year, Schumer met with CSX CEO Michael Ward and forged an alliance between the company and the government to work towards securing and completing the project.<sup>18</sup> In August, he wrote to Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood and not only voiced his support but additionally articulated that this infrastructural improvement was his number one transportation priority for the state. Finally, the Senator wrote to THUD Committee Chairwoman Patty Murray and Ranking Member Kit Bond, urging them to retain House funding levels of \$4 billion for high-speed rail in H.R. 3288, allowing Upstate New Yorkers to see this project come to fruition.<sup>19</sup> After this final push, no amount has been agreed upon for national funding of the project.

The first American train to reach 100 mph on a high-speed run was the New York Central and Hudson River RR no. 999.<sup>20</sup> New Yorkers will benefit immeasurably from restoring this legacy. A planner would be hard-pressed to find a more suitable location for such a project. The densely populated cities of upstate New York are too close for air travel, yet the volume of travelers between them is great enough to impress a sizable carbon footprint. High speed rail is a clear solution; it offers efficient transportation for

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> [http://schumer.senate.gov/new\\_website/record.cfm?id=310482](http://schumer.senate.gov/new_website/record.cfm?id=310482)

<sup>19</sup> [http://schumer.senate.gov/new\\_website/record.cfm?id=318189](http://schumer.senate.gov/new_website/record.cfm?id=318189)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.midwestsr.org/success/historical.html>

New Yorkers while reducing environmental impact and stimulating regional economic growth along the track.