Obama's remarks on high-speed rail transit

by UPI

WASHINGTON -- The following are remarks made by U.S. President Barack Obama on high-speed rail transportation Thursday in Washington.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Please, everybody have a seat. Have a seat.

Thank you very much. That is a wonderful reception.

And I want to -- in addition to Ray LaHood and Joe Biden, Rahm Emanuel, all of who have worked on this extensively, I also want to acknowledge Jim Oberstar and Rob Andrews, two of our finest members of Congress, but people who understand that investing in our infrastructure, investing in our transportation system pays enormous dividends over the long term. So I'm grateful to them for being here.

I've been speaking a lot lately about what we're doing to break free of our economic crisis (inaudible) put people back to work and move this nation from recession to recovery.

And one area in which we can make investments with impact both immediate and lasting is in America's infrastructure. And that's why the recovery and reinvestment plan we passed not two months ago included the most sweeping investment in our infrastructure since President Eisenhower built the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s.

And these efforts will save money by untangling gridlock, and saving lives by improving our roads, and save or create 150,000 jobs, mostly in the private sector, by the end of next year.

Already it's put Americans back to work. And so far, we're ahead of schedule, we're under budget, and adhering to the highest standards of transparency and accountability.

But if we want to move from recovery to prosperity, then we have to do a little bit more. We also have to build a new foundation for our future growth.

Today, our aging system of highways and byways, air routes and rail lines is hindering that growth. Our highways are clogged with traffic, costing us $80 billion a year in lost productivity and wasted fuel. Our airports are choked with increased loads. Some of you flew down here, and you know what that was about.

We're at the mercy of fluctuating gas prices, all too often. We pump too many greenhouse gases into the air.

What we need, then, is a smart transportation system equal to the needs of the 21st century, a system that reduces travel times and increases mobility, a system that reduces congestion and boosts productivity, a system that reduces destructive emissions and creates jobs.

What we're talking about is a vision for high-speed rail in America. Imagine boarding a train in the center of a city -- no racing to an airport and across a terminal, no delays, no sitting on the tarmac, no lost luggage, no taking off your shoes.

Imagine whisking through towns at speeds over 100 miles an hour, walking only a few steps to public transportation, and ending up just blocks from your destination. Imagine what a great project that would be to rebuild America.

Now, all of you know this is not some fanciful, pie-in-the-sky vision of the future.

It is now. It is happening right now. It's been happening for decades. The problem is, it has been happening elsewhere, not here. In France, high-speed rail has pulled regions from isolation, ignited growth, remade quiet towns into thriving tourist destinations.

In Spain, a high-speed line between Madrid and Seville is so successful that more people travel between those cities by rail than by car and airplane combined.

China, where service began just two years ago, may have more miles of high-speed rail service than any other country just five years from now.

And Japan, the nation that unveiled the first high-speed rail system, is already at work building the next: a line that will connect Tokyo with Osaka at speeds of over 300 miles per hour.

So it is being done. It is just not being done here. And there is no reason why we can't do this. This is America. There is no reason why the future of travel should lie somewhere else beyond our borders.

Building a new system of high-speed rail in America will be faster, cheaper, and easier than building more freeways or adding to an already overburdened aviation system. And everybody stands to benefit.

And that is why today, with the help of Secretary LaHood and Vice President Biden -- America's number one rail fan, I have been told -- I'm announcing my administration's efforts to transform travel in America within a historic investment in high-speed rail.

And our strategy has two parts: Improving our existing rail lines to make current train service faster -- so Rahm can, you know, shave a few hours over the course of a week -- but also identifying potential corridors for the creation of world-class, high-speed rail.

To make this happen, we've already dedicated $8 billion of Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds to this initiative, and I've requested another $5 billion over the next five years.

The Department of Transportation expects to begin awarding funds to ready projects before the end of this summer, well ahead of schedule.

And like all funding decisions under the Recovery Act, money will be distributed based on merit -- not on politics, not as favors, not for any other consideration; purely on merit.

Now, this plan is realistic. In the first round of funding, we'll focus on projects that can create jobs and benefits in the near term.

We're not talking about starting from scratch. We're talking about using existing infrastructure to increase speeds on some routes from 70 miles an hour to over 100 miles per hour. So you're taking existing rail lines -- you're upgrading them.

And many corridors merit even faster service, but this is the first step that is quickly achievable. And it will create jobs improving tracks, crossings, signal systems.

The next step is investing in high-speed rail that unleashes the economic potential of all of our regions by shrinking distances within our regions. There are at least 10 major corridors in the United States of 100 to 600 miles in length with a potential for successful high-speed rail systems. And these areas have explored its potential impact on their long-term growth and competitiveness, and they have already presented sound plans.

I want to be clear, no decision about where to allocate funds has yet been made. And any region can step up, present a plan, and be considered.

The high-speed rail corridors we've identified so far would 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.

Or California, where voters have already chosen to move forward with their own high-speed rail system; a system of new stations and 220 mile-per-hour trains that links big cities to inland towns, that alleviates crippling congestion on highways and at airports, and that makes travel from San Francisco to Los Angeles possible in two and a half hours.

And by making investments across the country, we'll lay a new foundation for our economic competitiveness and contribute to smart urban and rural growth. We'll create highly skilled construction and operating jobs that can't be outsourced, and generate demand for technology that gives a new generation of innovators and entrepreneurs the opportunity to step up and lead the way in the 21st century.

We'll move to cleaner energy and a cleaner environment. We'll reduce our need for foreign oil by millions of barrels a year and eliminate more than 6 billion pounds of carbon dioxide emissions annually, equal to removing 1 million cars from our roads.

Now, I know that this vision has its critics. There's those who say high-speed rail is a fantasy.

But its success around the world says otherwise. I know Americans love their cars, and nobody's talking about replacing the automobile and our highways as critical parts of our transportation system. We are upgrading those in the recovery package as well.

But this is something that can be done, has been done, and can provide us enormous benefits.

And there are those who argue that if an investment doesn't directly benefit the people of their district, then it shouldn't be made.

Jim, you know some of those arguments.

But if we follow that rationale, we'd have no infrastructure at all.

There are those who say, well, this investment's too small. But this is just a first step. We know that this is going to be a long- term project, but us getting started now, us moving the process forward, getting people to imagine what's possible, and putting resources behind it so that people can start seeing examples of this around the country, that's going to spur all kinds of activity.

Now, finally, there are those who say, at a time of crisis we shouldn't be pursuing such a strategy, we got too many other things to do.

But our history teaches us a different lesson. As Secretary LaHood just mentioned, President Lincoln was committed to a nation connected from east to west even at the same time he was trying to hold north and south together.

He was in the middle of a civil war. While fighting raged on one side of the continent, tens of thousands of Americans from all walks of life came together on the other. Dreamers and risk-takers willing to invest in America. College-educated engineers and supervisors who learned leadership in war. American workers and immigrants from all over the world, Confederates and Yankees, joined on the same side.

And, eventually, those two sets of tracks met and with one final blow of a hammer, backed by years of hard work and decades of dreams, the way was laid for a nationwide economy.

A telegraph operator sent out a simple message to a waiting nation. It just said, "Done."

A newspaper proclaimed, "We are the youngest of peoples, but we are teaching the world to march forward."

In retrospect, America's march forward seems inevitable, but time and again it's only made possible by generations that are willing to work and sacrifice and invest in plans to make tomorrow better than today.

That's the vision we can't afford to lose sight of, that's the challenge that's fallen to this generation.

And with this strategy for America's transportation future, and our efforts across all fronts to lay a new foundation for our lasting prosperity, that is the challenge we will meet.

"Make no little plans." It's what Daniel Burnham said in Chicago. I believe that about America. Make no little plans. So let's get to work.

Thank you, everybody.

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