

Going too slow on high-speed rail

By Joe Volpe, Citizen Special

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Canada is at a critical juncture. The recession has left hundreds of factories sitting empty and hundreds of thousands of workers sitting at home, not knowing what future lies ahead for their families. Added to this, the major issue before the recession hit -- the environment -- has not just gone away because we are not talking as much about it. Every day, we are exhausting our oil reserves, and the impact of an oil economy is slowly, but persistently, making our planet inhospitable.

But one project can at once lift our recessed economy and propel us forward into the economy of tomorrow: a multi-modal intercity high-speed rail network.

Investing in an intercity high-speed transportation system is the right choice. Every country in the G8 except ours has figured this out and has invested in HSR as a component of a multi-modal system. Corridors such as Calgary-Edmonton and Quebec City-Windsor are home to more than 50 per cent of Canadians and their population density equals, if not surpasses, that that of some European and Asian countries where HSR has become the norm.

From an economic development perspective, one must consider the industries and the thousands of jobs associated with building a system. We are not just talking about the thousands of workers who would be physically building the project on site, but also the thousands of steel workers, engineers, computer technologists, and manufactures who will be employed by this project. It is estimated that more than 270,000 jobs would be created over a 10-year period in the construction phase alone.

From an environment perspective, imagine taking 15 planes out of the sky or 400 cars off the road. That is what one train trip would achieve, and it will do so with up to four times less CO2 emissions per passenger. As we move closer to peak oil production, alternative transportation modes will be essential, and HSR is the best, if not the only, mass intercity transportation model available.

Very soon, the days of hopping on an airplane for an hour to get to Toronto or Montreal will come to an end. Jet fuel will be too expensive and carbon emissions too great. We need to position ourselves to be ready to meet these challenges. The technology exists. The money is there. All that is missing is the political will.

The challenges we face are not dissimilar to those confronting our founding fathers 140 years ago. They too stood at the precipice of a changing economy and they responded with a vision that has lit our path ever since -- to lay down a ribbon of steel from the Atlantic to the Pacific. While many scoffed at what they called "naïve ambition" or worse, "costly arrogance," no one accused those founding fathers of lacking political will.

Our times call for the same political will to raise our economy from the ashes of this recession to form the new economy, one that will leave a legacy for generations to come.

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