

Obama rail package could benefit service in Canada

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Canwest News Service
January 28, 2010

U.S.-bound travellers from several Canadian cities stand to benefit from \$8 billion in funding awarded Thursday by the Obama administration to speed up passenger-rail service and introduce high-speed trains across more than a dozen routes in the United States.

In Tampa, Fla., President Barack Obama said his administration is going ahead with a plan to ensure that the U.S. can catch up to other jurisdictions in Europe and China by building routes that create manufacturing and related jobs in America while reducing traffic, consumption of fossil fuels and pollution.

"Those things are fast, they are smooth, you don't have to take off your shoes," Obama said. "Why don't we have them? Part of it is that our population centres are farther apart. But let's face it, we just love our cars. We don't love gas prices, but we love our cars. But we need to invest in infrastructure like HSR (high-speed rail) that will allow us to choose the option of taking the train."

But some warn that Canada might lose job opportunities and economic benefits if it doesn't launch its own projects in its largest cities.

"We can't let the Americans get the jump on us," said federal Liberal transport critic Joe Volpe. "We're better equipped than they are to do this and we can't have a small-thinking government . . . stand in the way."

The biggest winners of the \$8 billion stimulus were the state of California, which will receive \$2.25 billion for a route connecting such major cities as Los Angeles and San Francisco, and the state of Florida, which will receive \$1.25 billion to begin building a high-speed rail link between Tampa, Orlando and Miami.

"There was a time not too long ago when this would have been a fantasy in North America," said Paul Langan, the founder of High Speed Rail Canada, an advocacy group which promotes the service. "But it's happening right now."

Some of the U.S. stimulus money will go toward upgrades on existing conventional rail lines that improve service to Canadian destinations. That includes about \$200 million in upgrades on the routes between Chicago and Detroit, across the Detroit River from Windsor, Ont., and on the New York-Buffalo route, which is linked to Toronto. The plan will also upgrade infrastructure between New York City and

Montreal with a new track segment of about five kilometres on the route to reduce congestion and improve on-time performance.

On the west coast, the Obama administration has awarded \$598 million in stimulus money for rail infrastructure between Eugene and Portland, Ore., and Seattle, on a route that continues north to Vancouver, as part of a step-by-step approach toward a true high-speed link between the cities.

The Harper government has announced more than \$1 billion worth of infrastructure upgrades since 2007 to improve performance on Via Rail's passenger network, but it has not yet said whether it supports additional funding to build high-speed rail networks.

"The announcement by the Obama administration is certainly interesting in the long-term," said James Kusie, a spokesman for Transport Minister John Baird. "Given the current economic climate, however, we are focused on implementing our economic action plan."

Charles Kelly, the chairman of the Cascadia Institute, a public policy think-tank, said that Canada would likely need to spend about \$800 million on the New Westminster Bridge near Vancouver to tackle one of the major causes of delays and congestion for trips to and from Seattle.

The swing bridge over the Fraser River must lift for marine traffic that has priority.

But he added that Obama's plan, which includes several billion dollars of additional funding over the next few years, could start a process that transforms transportation networks in North America over the next 20 years.

"The emphasis of the U.S. federal government moving into rail infrastructure investments is quite new," said Kelly. "Obama has changed the game."

The federal government is participating in a study with Quebec and Ontario on the feasibility of a new high-speed network between Quebec City and Windsor that is to be finished by March. The last study from 1995 estimated the route would cost about \$20 billion.

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