

Tom, regarding your column in today's Inquirer (March 29):

I think high speed rail service, in the 200 mph range, is getting far more attention and funding than it deserves. The cost in tracks, equipment and energy to go that fast increases exponentially with speed. And for what real benefit? Distances in Japan and Europe are considerably less than in this country, and after the mid-20th century wars they had to rebuild their infrastructure from scratch (with US Marshall Plan help). So it was much easier and relatively cheaper to install a fast rail service. China can do it now because a) we're paying for it through a ruinous balance of payments deficit (think Wal-Mart and Target), and b) their near-totalitarian government can expropriate right of way with little or no argument and cost.

Many Amtrak trains are delayed because they run on freight line tracks, and the freight trains always take precedence. Passenger trains have to get out of the way and stop to let the freights go by. Paying to build out the track work to let Amtrak's trains actually run at even today's speeds would make the service more attractive and viable for a fraction of the cost of a glamorous high speed line.

Another better use of rail funding is to expand local rail service. A prime case in point is the R8 commuter line to Newtown. That corridor has experienced explosive population growth since SEPTA ignominiously abandoned the line 20 years ago. Hundreds of people who would take the R8 to the city now drive to adjacent R3 and R5 stations, crowding out the local commuters who want to park at their "home" stations. Bucks county desperately wants the R8 back, but SEPTA won't even talk about it, even though the rail bed is entirely intact (2 miles have been converted into a bike/hike trail). Restoring the R8 would cut out a lot of rush hour driving and its attendant congestion, pollution, and greenhouse gases. And its capital and operating costs per mile would be a small fraction of a 200 mph line anywhere.

I'm a life-long rail fan, and I support Amtrak and our regional commuter rail system. And my decades as an electrical engineer give me great respect and admiration for the technology of high speed trains. But let's back away from the exciting, glamorous and enormously expensive high speed lines and put our tax money where it will do the most good for the most people.

Ron Dunbar