

POLICY BRIEF

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End of the Line for Maglev?

The Tribune-Review recently reported that: "Support for building a high-speed floating train that would carry passengers between Baltimore and Washington in 20 minutes appears to be dwindling in the face of a budget crisis and the loss of the region's Olympic bid."

In the article, the president of the Maryland Senate is quoted as saying: "Maglev right now — with the bumps it's encountered, including the loss of the Olympics and the economy and the continued citizen opposition — just doesn't have legs." Why, with structural deficits looming for Pennsylvania, Allegheny County and Pittsburgh, a lousy economy, one of the worst job growth records in the nation, citizen opposition, and nothing suggesting that a 300 mile per hour railroad is needed does maglev still have "legs" here?

Of late, cold water has been poured on hopes of grabbing \$950 million in federal money to fuel maglev construction by key regional leaders who have raised serious questions about where the local matching funds will come from in view of state and local government budget difficulties.

Still, supporters of maglev continue to believe, despite all evidence to the contrary, that this region can get in on the ground floor of a new 21st Century technology--magnetic levitation. They cling to a dream that maglev will spawn entire industries and revolutionize ground transportation. Consider these comments in a recent Post-Gazette editorial: *"The bonanza that awaits this region, if its proposal is chosen and the demonstration succeeds, is simply too great to pass up. By building at least stage one, the \$1.6 billion run between the airport and Downtown, Pittsburgh would gain new jobs, an attention-getting experiment, a possible manufacturing industry and, of course, high-speed transit along a congested corridor."* Note that the "demonstration" has shrunk by two thirds and no longer meets the requirements set for federal funding; but never mind the facts when big dreams are on the table.

Proponents point to Germany and Japan, where maglev has existed for nearly 40 years. But there are no practical applications of the technology, only demonstration projects serving as sales tools to foreigners who go there with visions of transplanting the technology to their neighborhoods. Pittsburgh and Pennsylvania have sent numerous delegations to Germany to reinforce their dreams of a domestic maglev. The Chinese

expect to have their very own demonstration train running between the city of Shanghai and its airport, a 33-kilometer (20.42 miles) run. At a cost of more than \$1 billion, the Chinese will enter the maglev global sweepstakes, and provide a third location for Pennsylvania's politicians to study.

California Governor Gray Davis--who has engineered his own economic miracle by running California's budget deficit up to \$21 billion--recently signed legislation to place a measure before the voters in 2004 that will authorize the sale of up to \$9.9 billion in bonds to finance a statewide high-speed train system.

Facing a \$4.5 billion annual deficit, Minnesota is eliminating its "highway helper" program--pick up trucks that come to the aid of stranded motorists. That hasn't stopped Minnesota from studying the idea of building a maglev to connect the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport in the Twin Cities to the Rochester International Airport, seven miles southwest of the City of Rochester, Minnesota at a cost of as much as \$4 billion.

It is worthwhile to question priorities when our already inadequate roads and bridges are crumbling, when Pittsburgh spends over \$18,000 per public school student and cannot deliver a quality education, when the City of Pittsburgh is already spending \$50 million more per year than it collects in taxes, and yet the push to be the maglev "leader" remains. One would think that rational analysis would prevail in the face of financial difficulty. But huge budget deficits haven't deterred California and Minnesota from attempts to climb aboard the maglev train. Why should local leaders give up the dream?

Hopes for federal bailouts spring eternal in the hearts of big spenders everywhere. However, the federal budget, thanks to recession, increased defense spending for a war on terrorism and the very real prospect of a war with Iraq, is in deficit to the point that there is little prospect indeed that the \$950 million for a maglev demonstration project will actually materialize.

What is truly puzzling, however, is precisely how our local promoters continue, despite the incessant pounding of reality, to cling to the delusion that *anything* is possible, and that taxpayers have an endless capacity to pay for it.

Here's an idea. Why not develop a workable plan, using more conventional technologies and lower costs, to move people quickly and smoothly along the airport to downtown corridor?

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