

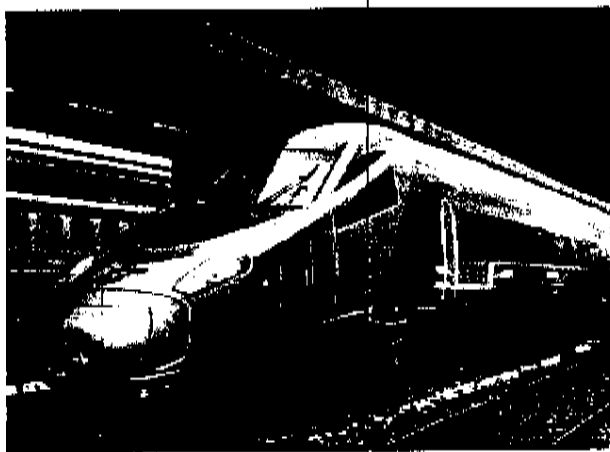
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Thursday, June 24, 2010 |

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High speed rail study set to begin



Associated Press

A high speed rail study has been commissioned for a route between Atlanta and Birmingham.

By [Jon Paepcke](#) | Investigative reporter

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala.— The Regional Planning Commission announced Thursday that the funding is in place to begin a feasibility study for high speed rail between Birmingham and Atlanta.

The \$500,000 study is being funded by the Georgia Department of Transportation, Norfolk Railroad and the Regional Planning Commission.

The study will examine speed, ridership, costs and economic impact of a high speed rail line.

The RPC said the study will last exactly one year and precede 2-3 additional studies before any construction of a high speed rail system can begin.

The federal government has set aside \$8 billion for the development of high speed mass transit as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.



EDDIE LARD: Catching the high-speed rail wave

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Eddie Lard -- The Birmingham News

Ancient Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu provided this nugget of wisdom: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

Maybe, that's a lesson Birmingham-area leaders are beginning to embrace.

Thursday provided a morsel of both optimism and realism. At a press conference in the offices of the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham, officials announced a \$500,000 study to look into the feasibility of a high-speed rail line between Birmingham and Atlanta.

I admit I struggle to imagine bullet-like trains traveling at speeds of 200 mph or more ferrying passengers between Georgia's and Alabama's largest cities. No doubt, if and when it happens, many of us won't be around for the maiden trip.

But we dare not rule it out. High-speed rail service has been talked about for many years -- decades, in fact -- and it's almost certainly doable. Whether it's financially feasible is the question.

Determining the feasibility is the purpose of the study, says Charles Ball, the RPC's executive director. Half of the money to pay for the study came from a grant through the Federal Railroad Administration. The other \$250,000 is being split among the RPC, the Georgia Department of Transportation and Norfolk-Southern railroad.

(Noticeably absent from this partnership is the Alabama Department of Transportation, whose tunnel-vision focus remains on roadbuilding.)

Certainly, skeptics will say a study does not a high-speed rail line make, and they can point out \$500,000 is a drop in the bucket of what will be needed if the study is to materialize into something bigger. But that's the point: It's a relatively small investment now that's an absolute must for us to even have a chance at a bigger prize.

There is big money out there for high-speed rail, which has become a favorite of the Barack Obama

administration as an economic stimulus. Ball, in announcing the study, noted that some \$8.5 billion had been awarded for high-speed rail projects across the country. California is getting \$2.5 billion; Florida, \$1.2 billion; and a project in Virginia and North Carolina, more than \$600 million.

Thinking big counts. Doing the little stuff first, the preliminary planning, is essential.

Ball acknowledges that Alabama has come late to the high-speed rail discussion. Late, but not out of the game.

Alabama's location makes it a player. While Atlanta is recognize as the gateway for high-speed rail corridors connecting the Southeast to the Eastern Seaboard and the Midwest, Alabama is an important link between Atlanta and New Orleans. So critical is the Alabama link that Birmingham businessman Richard Finley was chosen chairman of the Southern High Speed Rail Commission, which also includes Georgia, Mississippi and Louisiana. Last year, Birmingham was the host for a Passenger Rail Summit involving representatives of those states.

But just because we are in the middle of the map of the South (and the preferred westward corridor) doesn't mean we can afford not to do our part.

At Thursday's press conference, it was Birmingham Mayor William Bell who best summed up what's at stake. "We're at the beginning of the process," Bell said, recognizing that other states already had cashed in on their advanced planning in the latest round of federal funding. "We need to be prepared to take advantage of the next round of funding for high-speed rail."

That, indeed, is what this is about. When the train is ready to pull out of the station, we need to be ready to hop aboard. In the past, because of shortsightedness or our unwillingness to invest in other forms of transportation besides the automobile, we have been left behind.

High-speed rail is about more than moving people quickly from Atlanta to Birmingham, or to other parts. It's just as much about economic development. Think of the jobs that would be created and the money spent in Alabama and Birmingham, boosting our economy, from the construction and operation of a multibillion-dollar high-speed rail corridor.

Many people here are gung-ho over the economic benefits of a beltline highway through northern Jefferson County. We ought to be even more excited about the benefits of high-speed rail.

I know, it's hard to get excited about a study. But the journey of more than 1,000 miles -- from Atlanta to Birmingham, to New Orleans and points west -- begins with the first, small step.

Eddie Lard is an editorial writer for The News. E-mail: elard@bhamnews.com. Read more of his columns on

transportation online at blog.al.com/elard.

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