

Congressman Mica Tackles High Speed Rail

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US High Speed Rail (www.ushsr.com) held a major conference on the state of high speed rail (HSR) in America in Washington, DC last week. (full disclosure, Association for Public Transportation is a business partner of USHSR). There were over three hundred and fifty attendees from 28 countries whose ranks included business interests, transportation bureaucrats, advocates, and yes, high level politicians from both political parties. But of all the political leaders, no one was more anticipated than Congressman John Mica (R-FL), Chairman of the powerful House Transportation and Infrastructure (T & I) Committee, a conclave that will have a lot to say about transportation spending priorities in the upcoming years.

It had been an interesting couple of weeks for rail transportation aficionados. Two weeks ago, Congressman Mica held his first field meeting for the T & I Committee. It was held in Grand Central Terminal in New York City with the theme of “true” high speed rail (average speed greater than 200 mph) on the Northeast Corridor (NEC). Several proposals from different organizations are circulating. The cost of the 455 mile route from Washington, DC to Boston is in the \$100 to \$120 billion range for a new dedicated right of way (ROW). What was so telling about this meeting was not who provided testimony, but who was excluded – Amtrak.

Fast forward to last week when Vice President Biden appeared at the 30th Street Station in Philadelphia to announce an Obama administration’s plan to spend \$53 billion on high speed rail HSR over six years. Next at bat was the New York–New Jersey Gateway Project, or ARC (Access to the Region’s Core) tunnel redux- a project recently killed by NJ Governor Christie due to cost concerns. This was another proposal for a two track tunnel under the Hudson, but this HSR capable tunnel would go directly at current track level into an enlarged Penn-Moynihan Station versus a terminal at Macy’s basement. Gateway, with the support of Senators Lautenberg (D-NJ) and Menendez (D-NJ) would be led by Amtrak. It had a price tag of \$13.5 billion, which was interestingly close to the projected overrun cost of the original ARC tunnel.

Were all these random events? Hardly.

But while it may surprise some, Mica, a conservative Republican is actually quite bullish on HSR. However, this enthusiasm comes with a price. First and foremost, he strongly believes that HSR in America needs a successful demonstration project to convince American taxpayers that the investment will be worth the cost. He stated that this demonstration project it must be built in a corridor that has the ingredients for success: population density, high commercial interests, city pairs within the HSR sweet spot – 200 to 600 miles, and an existing support infrastructure (i.e. commuter rail and rapid transit) to feed HSR intercity routes. His preferred route – the NEC. “True” HSR on the NEC would translate into travel times of under 90 minutes from Boston to New York and 90 minutes from New York to Washington, unlike the current Amtrak Acela times of over three and one half hours, and just under three hours, respectively.

Mica does not think that Amtrak has the capabilities or the culture to manage a successful HSR project. The Congressman stated that having Amtrak retool for true HSR is akin to asking Bernie Madoff to manage a new pension fund. And, Mica is adamant that there must be a private sector contribution to any HSR program. He sees a program with a federal contribution, a state match, and contributions by the private sector with private public partnerships (PPP). His objective is to have “as minimum government subsidy and maximum private participation as possible”. Mica noted that Amtrak's HSR NEC proposal has no PPP component and he pointed out the lack of commercial investment around the NEC ROW, unlike those in other countries that have successful HSR programs.

The Congressman also questioned the role of the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) in selecting the winners in the HSR sweepstakes. He stated that the FRA is a regulatory organization which does not have the necessary expertise to take on the role of a grant agency. He took issue with the HSR grants awarded to date, noting far too much money was spent on small grants for what the “administration touted as high-speed rail ended up as embarrassing snail-speed trains to nowhere.”

Mica indicated he is not afraid of big megaprojects such as a HSR NEC, but he fully understands that he will need considerable help going forward to make these plans a reality. He also appreciates the need for a multi-year funding plan. This will provide the certainty and security required by equipment manufacturers who will be asked to make billion dollar capital investments to gear up for projects. What was unsaid is that he fully expects to take fire from both sides of the aisle. Support from bipartisan politicians and cover from HSR transportation advocates will play a major role in determining the future path of high speed rail in America.

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