HIGHER-SPEED RAIL/USA

Express delivery

Henry Ford and Interstate highways put paid to the US railway's glory years but new higher-speed projects could make riding the tracks part of life once more. Well, one day anyway.

By *Ed Stocker*
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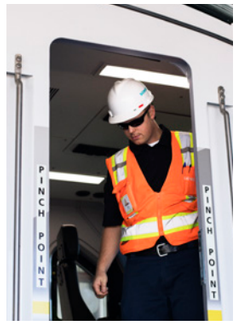
The wi-fi is complimentary and the pet policy friendly. Endowed with a modern train fleet built by Siemens in California and using parts from more than 40 US-based suppliers, the wagons have been given licks of fluorescent colour. The Brightline service, which soft launches its West Palm Beach-to-Fort Lauderdale route in July, is being billed as a triumph of privately funded rail. And while the Florida line – eventually extending to Miami – certainly represents a public-transport coup in a nation traditionally hostile to such endeavours, there is one caveat: Brightline's top speed is 201km/h the same as the UK's InterCity trains of the 1970s.



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Decades after the lofty concept of creating high-speed rail in the world's most powerful nation was first floated – aimed at bringing a creaking transit system into line with other developed countries – the dream of zipping across the US by fast train remains just that.

One of the biggest obstacles is cultural. "We are trying to change the mindset of a public that has grown accustomed to travelling in personal vehicles," says Frank Banko, a vice-president at WSP engineering consultancy in Newark, New Jersey. The company has worked on a host of high-speed rail projects, including HS2 in the UK as well as the proposed Atlanta-Chattanooga route in the US. The public, he says, is "being asked to consider something that we can't really demonstrate in a tangible way because it doesn't exist yet".

Banko says the car's role is central, helping herald the train's decline as a mode of transport in the 1920s and sealing its fate with the federal government's aggressive expansion of the Interstate-highway programme in the 1950s. The car represents everything gloriffed by the American dream and extolled in popular culture: the space, the freedom and the individualism of the "open road", all fuelled by low petrol prices. As Clemson University professor and train expert H Roger Grant says, the car is "modern, it's powerful, it's sexy" – which can make the prospect of a crowded passenger train rather unappealing.

Yet it would be wrong to imagine that train travel in the US is dead and one needs to differentiate between express and true high-speed, or bullet, services. Brightline's Florida project may optimistically be referred to as "higher-speed" – high-speed needs to be at least 241km/h – but it is proof that new projects can work. Brightline's success, though, is due to a particular boon: its sister company owns the rail corridor in which it is operating, meaning no new tracks needed to be laid. "That's an enormous advantage," says Brightline's CEO Dave Howard. "To be able to acquire property and then build the track infrastructure would be a showstopper from a financial standpoint."

Because there is no federal high-speed rail programme it's often up to local offcials – or private companies such as Brightline – to get an idea off the ground. And that means having to co-ordinate across boundaries, which can involve opposing opinions. In 2009, for example, a Chicago-to-Milwaukee line was effectively killed when Wisconsin governor Scott Walker turned down federal money allocated to it. Often it is the lack of "a dedicated and reliable source of funding", according to Banko, that makes for such a laborious process. Add to the mix dwindling track mileage (in 2000 it was a quarter of the 1900 figure) and the sheer distances between cities, and you get a sense of the challenge.

Yet high-speed rail initiatives have emerged – with the most high-profile in California. Set to be completed by 2029, it will link San Francisco with Los Angeles using trains that reach speeds of 354km/h. And while the 191km of track under construction in the Central Valley point to real progress, it's been a slog. California first floated the idea of high-speed rail in the 1980s, eventually financing a chunk of it through a bond deal approved by Californians in 2008 and federal funding handed out by Barack Obama that was originally earmarked for the doomed Chicago-Milwaukee route. Opposition from land owners and farmers as well as environmental regulations and budget overruns caused some to declare the project dead. It's a charge rejected by California High Speed Rail Authority CEO Jeff Morales. "Any major project is declared dead multiple times before it's finished," he says.

California is an interesting model because it hasn't used any private capital. So can it survive without more federal funding? "We will of course take it if it comes our way but we're not depending on it," says Morales. Trying to read Donald Trump's mind is a losing game. On the one hand he has promised $1trn (€917bn) in infrastructure investment and in February he publicly lamented the lack of a US high-speed train on a par with Japan. On the other hand, he consistently reverses on decisions and has already met opposition from Californian GOP members – averse to "big government" – and a Congress that will likely take umbrage at his budget plans.

While California says it doesn't need further public funds and sees its future in public-private partnership, some projects have looked to avoid state or federal handouts altogether. In Texas a private company is working on a line linking Dallas/Fort Worth with Houston using Japanese Shinkansen bullet trains. Texas Central, the firm behind the project, is keen to point out that no state or federal money will be used for the $12bn (€11bn) costs. Critics say it will be impossible without taxpayer money but Holly Reed, managing director for external affairs, says it will succeed in the "free market". She spends much of her time in the state capital, Austin, trying to brief against disinformation and bills that might scupper the line. "Any time you have a big project like this, it's hard for some people to see the vision," she says. Set for completion in 2023, she claims that the distance between Houston and Dallas is the "sweet spot" for high-speed rail, aided by two strong economies and a relatively straight route.

Back in the public sector, Amtrak – the for-profit national company funded by Congress – is getting in on the act. Some of its long-distance services are threatened by budget cuts but it has ordered 28 new trains for its successful northeastern Acela Express service that will reach 255km/h. They are capable of higher speeds but old infrastructure makes that impossible for now – which sums up where the US is with high-speed rail: inching along, with ambitious projects from California to the Midwest but with so much that needs building. Indeed, it's hard to see how the public and private schemes will form a coherent network.

The positive rub? "The US has a love affair with speed," says Professor Grant, pointing to how the US led rail technology in the past. A glimmer of hope, then, that the high-speed dream might just stay on track. — (M)

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(1) Shades on, handbrake off (2) Full steam ahead: Brightline preparing for a test run

Eating up the miles

We'd like to see future train services invest in the restaurant car; it's a no-brainer way to prove that there's more to Uncle Sam's cookbook than popular myth would have you believe. The US is vast and each state or region should be represented on the menu. We'd like to see seasonal Gulf shrimp or crayfish, some lightly charred Long Island squid or a piece of Texan organic beef. Not to mention a decent pinot noir from Oregon.

North American high-speed projects we'd like to see:

1. **Seattle to Vancouver:** Amtrak operates a fast service linking Portland and Vancouver but the corridor needs a true bullet train.
2. **New York City to Albany:** The 240km to the state's administrative capital is the perfect distance for a bullet-train route.
3. **Chicago-Detroit-Toronto:** A Midwest link could help lure people back to Detroit and consolidate manufacturing.
4. **Atlanta to Charlotte**: A Georgia-North Carolina route offers big economic benefits.
5. **Ottawa-Montréal**: A 30-minute link could transform the region's fortunes.