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## Local leaders happy with \$151 million grant for high-speed rail

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The modest \$151 million in federal stimulus funds that New York state received for high-speed rail will pay for preliminary work — in the Rochester area — on the first stretch of a long-sought passenger rail corridor across upstate New York.

The 11-mile length of track running from Riga to Byron, Genesee County, would run next to two existing tracks but be engineered so that Amtrak trains could attain a speed of 110 miles per hour, compared to the current maximum of 79 mph.

But for the foreseeable future, it would be a fast track to nowhere. Washington has so far declined to provide any of the billions of additional dollars that would be needed to construct the rest of the 320-mile cross-state passenger line, and the Riga-to-Byron demonstration project was one of the few New York state jobs approved to which the term "high speed" applies at all.

Other projects include \$1.5 million to improve handicapped accessibility of restrooms and trains and make various cosmetic improvements — re-stripe the parking lot, repair windows and ceiling panels and the like — at Rochester's down-at-the-heels station on Central Avenue. The station in Depew, Erie County, also would get a minor facelift.

A more ambitious \$48 million proposal to renovate Rochester's station and build a new boarding platform was shot down by the feds.

The approved project with the most immediate significance, experts said, was a \$91 million job to eliminate a notorious bottleneck between Albany and Schenectady. That 18-mile stretch has a single track shared by Amtrak passenger trains and CSX freights, with the latter usually given priority.

"It will end the days of a passenger train having to wait 25 minutes for a freight train to clear," said Bruce B. Becker, president of the Empire State Passenger Association. He said the new second track near Albany was his advocacy group's top priority.

That project, which state documents indicated could be finished by September 2011, should improve reliability and on-time performance of trains moving to and from Rochester. But the new stretch of track will be rated for 110 mph, Becker noted, and its construction is a necessary part of the cross-state high-speed connection.

Becker, who lives in suburban Buffalo, said his group was a bit disappointed New York did not garner more stimulus money for rail.

"We were not expecting billions of dollars for New York state by any means, but \$151 million — while it will accomplish some important projects — we were certainly hoping for more than that," he said. He was optimistic New York could tap another chunk of federal rail money to be disbursed later this year.

U.S. Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-Fairport, insisted that the upstate House caucus, which she leads, was not worried that seven states were given more money than New York. "Disappointment is not in the upstate caucus of the House," Slaughter said. "The competition was fierce for this. To be number eight, I'm tickled pink with that."

Others echoed that sentiment. Ellen Rosen, a spokeswoman for the Rochester Business Alliance, a member of the High Speed Rail New York Coalition, called the stimulus grants "a positive development for Rochester and upstate."

Ken Warner, who leads an organization of unions and businesses, said the announcement was a welcome surprise.

"This is exciting news and we're grateful," said Warner, executive director of UNICON.

Rochester Mayor Robert Duffy said he was "thrilled with the announcement. I hope it's the first step in the process to create a high-speed rail system for upstate New York."

One note of caution came from Monroe County Executive Maggie Brooks. She said there are a lot of unanswered questions about high-speed rail but that she's not opposed to studying something that can add quality of life.

"I just think at the end of the day, high-speed rail will be a significant investment," Brooks said, adding that there doesn't seem to be a sense of urgency in the community about the need for it. "It has to be a good value for taxpayers."

The \$58 million approved for the 11-mile-stretch in Monroe and Genesee counties should pay for final design and construction, said state transportation department spokeswoman Jennifer Post. Documents indicate work would be finished in the fall of 2011.

Becker said the link could be a test bed for the new track that the state hopes to build on the CSX right-of-way from Albany to Niagara Falls. Until those longer stretches of track were built, though, the 11-mile link with the higher speed limit would be more of a novelty for western New York passengers.

Because Amtrak's diesel-powered locomotives need time to speed up and slow down, trains likely would max out at 110 mph for only a few minutes. "It will have minimal impact on trip time," Becker said.

At the Amtrak station Thursday, the idea of a train speeding all the way across upstate clearly held some appeal.

"If it were faster, I'd ride it more," said Phil Delvecchio, 19, of Rochester, who was taking his first trip to New York City in years.

High-speed rail might make Rochester more attractive to both residents and tourists, said Danny Stephens. The 33-year-old lives in New York City and was interviewing for a residency position at the University of Rochester Medical Center. One consideration is the time it would take him to get to Washington, D.C., to visit his partner.

"If I had a weekend off, could I get to D.C.? It's a 10-hour train ride or a 6½-hour car ride."

As for visitors, Stephens said, trains could help. "There's so much more to offer here, like the Finger Lakes region, but getting here is a hassle for a lot of people."

High-speed rail also was intriguing to Victoria Payne of Farmington, Ontario County, who was waiting for the train to the New York City area with her friends Connie Gates and Jenny Lloyd, both of Pittsford.

"There isn't anything that would make (the train) better other than being faster," said the 68-year-old Payne. "It seems wrong that it takes the same amount of time (to New York City) as it does to drive," she said.

She'd want to know just how much faster the high-speed version would be — and when it might arrive.

"High-speed trains would be here, but I wouldn't be around," she said. "It's kind of a dream. A pie-in-the-sky hope."

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