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### As society-changing as the Interstate Highway System

By Patrick T. Reardon on Fri., 07/31/2009 –9:06 am.

Rick Harnish has a dream.

He envisions a national commitment to a new transportation philosophy that will be as sweeping and as society-changing as the construction in the 1950s of the Interstate Highway System --- but without the cars.

His vision is to use high-speed trains as a cool, exciting catalyst to boost American ridership on all railroads.

Harnish is the executive director of [the Midwest High Speed Rail Association](#), a Chicago-based group advocating for faster and better train service throughout the Midwest, and he was the keynote speaker at the recent Transport Chicago conference.

In France and Spain, he says, “High speed rail completely changed the politics of transportation.”

The sleek trains travelling at 200 miles an hour and more caught the public’s fancy, giving rail a much stronger voice in planning decisions.

That’s what Harnish wants in the United States, and, it seems, he already has an ally in President Barack Obama who included \$8 billion for high speed rail --- or, at least, higher speed rail --- in his economic stimulus package.

Last year, under President George W. Bush, funding for high speed rail was a meager \$30 million, Harnish says.



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This blog is about history, planning and the future. It’s rooted in the recognition that we live in a world that is created by plans – and by the failure to make plans. [\[MORE\]](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Patrick T. Reardon](#) is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [\[MORE\]](#)

The year before, it was zero. “Having a 180-degree turn in public policy is a big boost,” he says. “That’s a real critical turning point.”

### **A real option**

In Illinois, high speed rail supporters are hoping to use stimulus funds to repair and upgrade the tracks between Chicago and St. Louis.

Today, Harnish says the top speed for the trains along the route is 74 miles an hour, and the trip takes about five and a half hours --- if the train is on time. But, if the track is improved, the speed could be increased to 110 miles an hour, and the trip reduced to four hours.

“At that point, the train becomes a real option to driving,” he says.



To be sure, he adds, the service still wouldn’t be high speed, but this interim improvement “is a necessary step.”

A true high speed train, Harnish’s ultimate goal, would travel at 220 miles an hour and need only two hours to get from the Windy City to the Gateway City. “Two hours lets you make a trip to and from St. Louis in a single day, get your business done and still have time to have dinner with your family,” he says.

### **Just a train**

The beauty of high speed rail, according to Harnish, is that it’s not a brand-new, untested technology, but a refinement of a techniques and systems long in use.

“A high speed train is just a train,” he says. And its incorporation into the nation’s rail system would be similar to the way the Interstates were connected with the road network. “It’s just adding sections, like sections of the Interstate Highway System were added. You just build discrete pieces.”

Those new highways did much to help foster the development of suburbs around every U.S. city --- and, in doing so, changed the way Americans live their lives. High speed trains could also have sweeping social effects.

“It will make living in the cities it services more attractive,” Harnish says. “That’s because costs are less and people are closer together and interact more. You don’t have to bring your two-ton briefcase [i.e., your car] with you to everywhere you stay.”

But will it ever happen? As Harnish himself points out, the nation has been ignoring its rail system for 40 years. How close are we to high speed trains?

“It’s possible,” he says. “People need to be very vocal to their elected officials. It’s not going to happen without strong grass-roots support.”