

Geographer David Keeling argues that America needs to get serious about building a high-speed rail network. As Americans pay to fill their tanks for their summer getaways this year, perhaps they will be ready to listen. (763 words)

The author is a member of the American Geographical Society's Writers Circle. The American Geographical Society is America's oldest geographical organization. Its mission is to link the business, professional, and scholarly worlds in the creation and application of geographical knowledge and techniques to address economic, social, and environmental programs. By distributing op-ed essays, it hopes to encourage public discussion of geographical issues.

The opinion expressed is that of the author and not of the American Geographical Society,

For more information about AGS and its Writers Circle, please see www.amergeog.org or contact Mary Lynne Bird, Executive Director, at (212)422-5456, (212)422-5480 (fax) or MLBird@amergeog.org

June 21, 2006

Get Back on the Rails, America.

by David Keeling

America desperately needs a new transportation strategy, a bold policy akin to the development of the Eisenhower interstate network in the 1960s and 1970s. The 21st century network should be a high-speed rail system that can connect people and places rapidly, efficiently, and in an environmentally sustainable way. Instead Americans are suffering from a crisis of imagination in the transportation arena. They face rising gas prices, ongoing instability in many oil-producing countries, inadequate oil-refining capacity, but with a paucity of leadership and creative thinking from Congress and the Executive.

Often seen as a mundane component of the national and global economy, transport is, in fact, critical to the growth and development of societies. Wealthier countries in the global economy have benefited from modern transport systems, while the absence of such systems limits the ability of poor countries to move forward. Accessibility and mobility are critical to national economies, as people, goods, and information must circulate freely and efficiently if countries are to take advantage of the opportunities created by a rapidly expanding global economy.

A high-speed rail system is what is needed now. Such a system could ease our dependence on imported oil, provide additional transport opportunities for communities across the country, and encourage planners to rethink suburban sprawl policies that have blighted many towns and cities. Government and business investment in high-speed rail systems would create jobs, financial opportunities, and a renewed entrepreneurial spirit in America. Road deaths would be reduced, a long-overdue reform of unwieldy tax subsidies for automobiles could be achieved, and America's vulnerability to international oil politics might be drastically reduced.

The Eisenhower interstate system provides a model of how bold strategies can transform a society. Conceived and implemented during the Cold War initially as a means of rapidly deploying troops, matériel, and evacuees, the nearly 47,000-mile highway network has changed the way Americans move about the landscape. Imagine if a similar network of high-speed rail lines were to be built across the country, linking major towns and cities together in a fast and efficient system of intercity, intrastate, and cross-country services. Imagine the jobs that would be created, from planning and designing routes, to construction of rights of way, railcars, stations, and support systems. This would be an investment in social overhead capital capable of transforming the American way of life in ways that could scarcely have been imagined 50 years ago.

Naysayers of a national high-speed rail network argue that the costs would be prohibitive, even though the Interstate system has cost about \$114 billion, with ongoing repairs, maintenance costs, and tax subsidies additional. Some argue that the U.S. covers too much territory, towns and cities are too dispersed, and that such a rail system could never be profitable (arguments that were never made about the proposed Interstate system). However, social overhead investment principles argue that the intangible benefits (environment, health, and jobs, to name but a few) of a national high-speed rail system would generate "profits" that could go far beyond traditional ways of valuing such investments in infrastructure. America's geography also argues for a national high-speed rail network, as a fairly dense network of towns and cities exists across the east, Sunbelt south and southwest, west coast, and interior Midwest. High-speed rail journeys between towns and cities that are up to 300 miles apart (which covers almost all of the towns and cities in the regions noted above) would save energy, time, and money.

Imagine speeding from Chicago to St. Louis (300 miles) in less than two hours, or from Dallas to Houston (240 miles) in 90 minutes. These times would beat any combination of road and air travel, city center to city center, achievable with today's transport network. Overseas, the Europeans, Japanese, Australians, Chinese, and Koreans, among others, are decades ahead of the U.S. in high-speed passenger and freight rail development.

Creating a national high-speed rail network would provide travelers with more choices, it would help to revitalize American industry, and it could provide entrepreneurial opportunities for thousands of small and medium businesses. Airline

companies could abandon many non-profitable short- and medium-haul routes and invest in rail operations, as Richard Branson's Virgin group has done in the United Kingdom. Bus networks with state-of-the-art electric or hybrid-fuel fleets could be built to service links between rail stations, suburbs, park-and-rides, and other locales. Such a 21st century transport system is possible for Americans. Sadly lacking are national political leaders with imagination, entrepreneurs willing to take risks, and a desire to wean ourselves from a dangerous dependency on automobiles.

Let's get back on the rails, America!

David Keeling is Head of the Department of Geography & Geology at Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42101-1066. He can be reached at david.keeling@wku.edu or at (270)745-4555