NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Yes to High Speed Rail

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 9, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

My colleague Rich Heffern posted yesterday [1]about the Obama administration's request for $63 billion in new funding for high-speed rail and light-rail projects.

Last night on "Hardball," Chris Matthews asked why America is the only place you can't get on a high speed rail for travel between major cities, as he and his wife Kathleen recently did while traveling from Rome to Florence. China and Japan are way ahead of the U.S. in this area also.

The problem, however, is not just a lack of funding for high speed rail in previous administrations. The problem is a leftover from the nineteenth century and, in the event, the current political climate makes solving that problem impossible. (Already, you can hear the cries against "more government spending.") The problem is that the railroad companies own their own tracks and it is the tracks that need modernization. Train companies own their own tracks because back then, when the tracks were laid, they had more money than the government. Airlines do not own their own airports. I do not own the street in front of my house. But, railroad companies own the tracks.

A commenter on Rich's blog notes that the Acela does not go much faster than the bus in getting one from NYC to Boston. True. But, not because os the train itself. The train can go 130 miles an hour, but the tracks are no so devised to permit the train to go that fast. You also could not drive a new car on an 1880s road, could you?

I hope the administration will persist in this effort. There are imaginative ways to create new, faster tracks, for example, using the medians of highways, thus avoiding the need to obtain property through eminent domain claims and, in most cases, avoiding any negative environmental impact. Amtrak can put "car trains" on the Northeast Corridor, allowing vacationers to travel to Maine and Cape Cod, etc., by train with their cars in the back, the way you do when you take the ferry from Connecticut to Long Island. Anyone who has been stuck in traffic on I-95, and throughout the summer, I-95 turns into a parking lot, will see the value of this proposal. Additionally, new construction jobs will be created and, once completed, a train terminus guarantees the concentration of population that invites investment in new restaurants and retail outlets. Everything about trains is good. I wish the White House has put aside this much money in the first Stimulus, but better late than never! All aboard!

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Links:

[1] http://ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/white-house-announces-53-billion-6-year-plan-nationwide-light-rail