

# Selling the Value of High-Speed Rail

By Christopher J. Taylor

Venerated French novelist Marcel Proust said, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes.” In the United States, many perceive high-speed rail (HSR) as an expensive journey to distant “new lands.” Yet the real voyage of discovery, as Proust advised, should be about seeing HSR with new eyes. We must change the way people view HSR by teaching them what we know: HSR is a practical, successful and equitable transportation mode that will benefit everyone in this nation—whether they ride the rails or not.

“Boy, I got vision, and the rest of the world wears bifocals,” muses Butch in the classic western movie, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Many in the HSR community share that feeling. For us, HSR’s benefits are clear and compelling. Study after study proves its far-reaching value. Regrettably, those studies tend to circulate only within the HSR and rail communities—in effect, preaching to the choir. Though it’s hard to imagine how others don’t see the merits, they just don’t. And that’s because we never convinced the broader public by sharing what we know. Think about it.

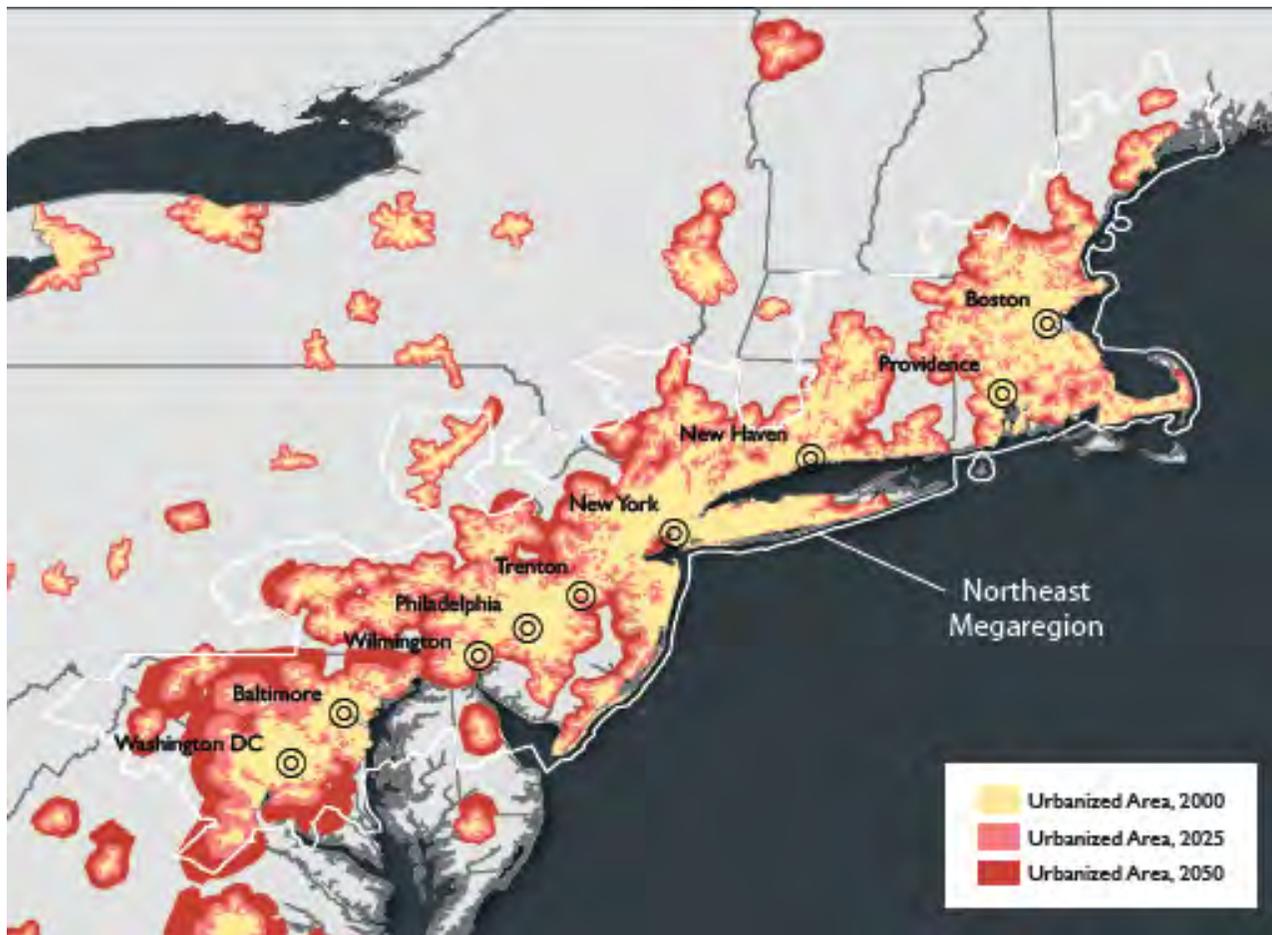
First, HSR appears to be hugely expensive. Media reports routinely place the tab in the billions. At a time of great economic distress, spending those billions on infrastructure for a



specific travel market is never popular. But it’s not just those daunting cost figures. Most people believe, perhaps correctly, that they’ll never ride HSR, so why pay for it? But ride it or not, virtually everyone will benefit from an HSR system. Sadly, the public does not yet perceive the collateral benefits HSR will bring. And they don’t know these benefits because we’ve never

conveyed them correctly. If HSR trains are ever to ply American rails, we must remedy this communications failure. We must demonstrate how HSR will improve national transportation and our overall quality of life.

Regrettably, the anti-HSR movement is much better at presenting its case. They have convinced much of America that HSR is too ex-



pensive and unnecessary, and that scant transportation funding should be spent elsewhere. In presenting our side of the HSR story, we must address their dubious claims and get the truth out in a way people can understand.

### HSR: The Plane Truth

Frequent air travelers bemoan airport congestion. Infrequent travelers don't love it either. Both have much to complain about. As a result, many want more money spent on aviation. Yet

few of those air travelers understand that HSR will actually ease aviation congestion. HSR works best on 100–500 mile trips. In the United States, most such trips are completed by air or car. With an HSR system in place, such flights could be dramatically reduced, freeing up valuable capacity and relieving airport congestion. Here's an example.

The America 2050 report *High-Speed Rail in America* (January 2011) ranked New York's three major airports as the nation's worst in terms of average delays; Philadelphia, Boston,

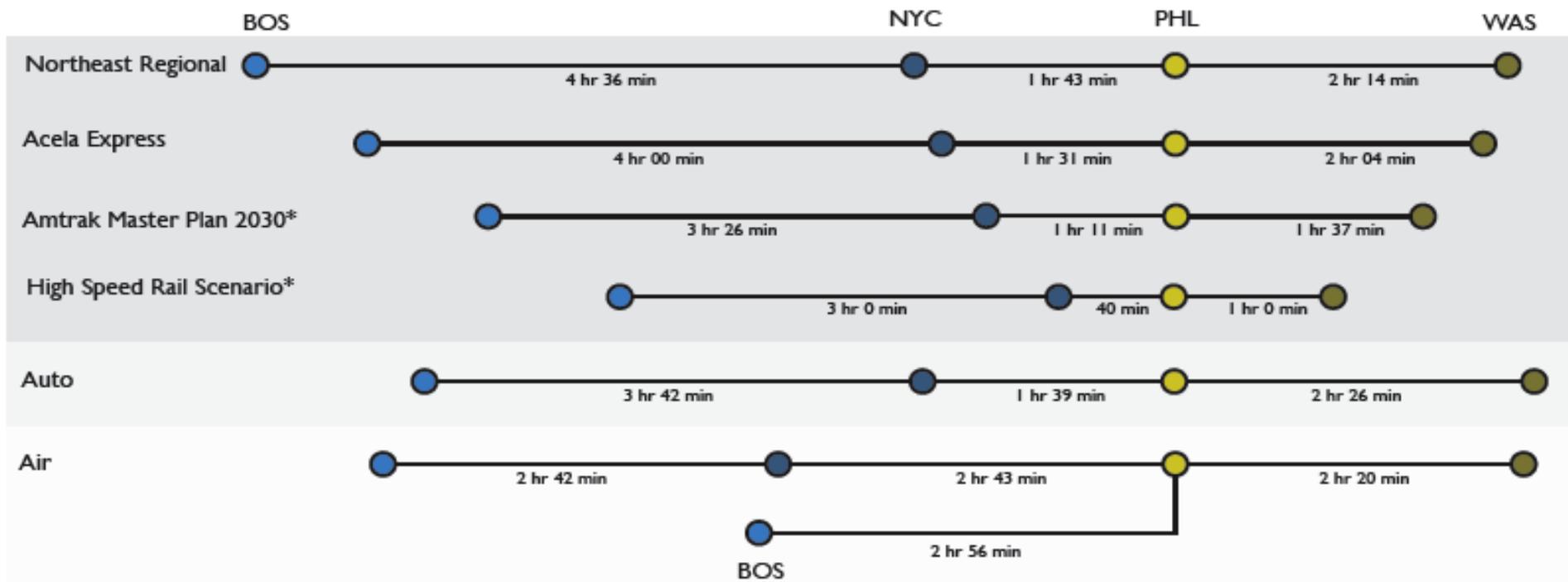
and Washington Dulles also crowded their way into the top ten. Given the severity of the congestion, it would seem natural to just spend our way out of the problem. But we can't.

A University of Pennsylvania study, *High-Speed Rail in the Northeast Megaregion* (Spring 2010), points out, "To expand aviation capacity, large amounts of available land would be needed to add new runways or build new airports. In more than 50 years, only one new greenfield airport has been built in the United States, and this, Denver International, required a land area twice the size of Manhattan." Such space is rarely, if ever, available, especially in the Northeast. So, how does HSR help?

*High-Speed Rail in America* points out there are approximately 1.3 million annual air passengers who travel between New York and Boston, 1.2 million between New York and Washington and 0.8 million between Washington and Boston. Diverting these fliers to HSR would remove roughly 3.3 million passengers each year from airport terminals, significantly reducing aviation congestion while adding capacity for longer-distance flights. And what is true for the Northeast Corridor is true for the nation—and large, airports are at capacity, and adding capacity is both expensive and severely constrained. HSR offers the best potential to add substantial capacity in a cost-effective manner.

### HSR: Creating the Road Less Traveled

In the United States, the automobile is sacrosanct. But many highways are at capacity too. And spending to reduce congestion signifi-



\* indicates not yet built

cantly may not even be practicable. However, funding isn't the only issue.

According to *High-Speed Rail in the Northeast Megaregion*, "Expanding capacity on Northeast highways would also require large amounts of land and incur substantial costs." A recent report by the I-95 Corridor Coalition estimated "annual expenditures of approximately \$25 billion would be required to meet projected capacity needs through 2035. Additionally, because many highways in the Northeast run through dense urban areas, expansion would require significant land acquisitions that would be practically and politically difficult."

The report also states that a new, "fully built

in 2035" HSR system would "serve more than 27 million passengers who would have driven to their destination." Imagine 27 million fewer roadway users on highways in the Northeast! This is the kind of scenario we must put in front of the populace. But why stop there?

Extending analysis over the next 50+ years, the report team concludes, "The benefits of high-speed rail significantly exceed the costs. These benefits will extend from rail passengers, who will save a cumulative total of 2.96 billion hours of travel time, to every single individual who breathes the Northeast air with 3.06 million fewer tons of carbon monoxide. The construction of a reliable high-speed rail

system will divert more than 1.36 billion riders from cars, which will avoid more than 1.6 billion motor vehicle crashes, save \$278 billion in accident costs and more than 3,500 lives. HSR will also divert more than 121 million passengers from airplanes, which will reduce the need for 1.70 million short-haul flights. The discounted cumulative monetary value of these benefits is \$71.8 billion, which exceeds discounted project costs of \$52 billion by the ratio of 1.38."

This is news. But this news is not finding its way to the right people. We must package these insights better to reach our audience.



## HSR: The Rail Effect

Though commuters rarely think of it in these terms, HSR will also help regional rail users. Commuter rail's chief concern is capacity. Anecdotal, as a regular New Jersey Transit commuter, I experience standing-room-only trains on a daily basis. Still, commuters and operators believe money should be spent on corridor-capacity improvement projects, rather than HSR. What they don't realize is that HSR is a capacity-improvement project.

With a dedicated HSR system, higher-speed intercity trains (which require greater separation between trains) would be removed from the regional network, providing increased track and platform capacity. In effect, it's an upgrade without even changing existing commuter rail. So, when funds are spent to improve regional

train capacity, those funds will go much farther. HSR can be a win for everyone.

## HSR Is Looking for a Few Good Riders

Perhaps the most oft-heard and misleading critique is that only a select few will ever ride HSR. True, most people may never ride HSR. But the misleading notion is that HSR will only benefit its riders. This is simply not true. It is critical to illustrate exactly how non-HSR users will benefit from a fully built HSR network.

### "But I Want to Go to Point C!"

Finally, HSR opponents insist that cars provide the flexibility to reach varied locations, while HSR only goes from one city to the next. Well, that's true for an individual. But we're

talking about enhancing mass transportation; in fact, individual-focused transportation is causing much of our current congestion. In addition, the same criticism can be leveled at plane travel. Planes only go from city to city to deliver passengers. Once those passengers deplane, however, they use a host of modes to continue their journey. The same will be true for HSR.

HSR is not a stand-alone transportation system. It is part of an integrated network that encompasses all forms of transportation, including regional rail, aviation, highways, buses, bus-rapid transit, and light-rail transit. And that is exactly the message we must deliver clearly and compellingly to the general public.

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes." Proust is on point. For too long, HSR has been perceived as a journey to new lands. We must help Americans across the country to see HSR with new eyes. The general public must learn that HSR has the greatest potential to add needed transportation capacity in the most cost-effective manner possible. Other modes have reached capacity and are difficult, if not impossible, to expand. HSR is not a foreign idea or an extravagant, unnecessary concept. It is our nation's single greatest hope for expanding and improving our national, regional and local transportation network. Now we must only convince the public of that. ■

*Christopher J. Taylor is the New York-based deputy director for high-speed rail at AECOM.*