



New England Lawmakers Gain Ally for Rail Project

Northeast high-speed rail project gains GOP ally; officials hope project is US success story

By SUSAN HAIGH Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. January 28, 2011 (AP)

A key Republican congressman voiced strong support Friday for the region's high-speed rail aspirations, saying the northeast corridor can be a "success story" that will encourage rail across the nation.

Rep. Bill Shuster of Pennsylvania, the new chairman of the subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines and Hazardous Materials, acknowledged that some of his GOP colleagues are skeptical of spending federal money on high-speed rail. But he pledged to fight for the project, saying he believes it's good for the country and could be profitable.

"It's important to the nation that we develop high-speed rail and it should be right here in the northeast corridor because of the population density," Shuster said. "I think it's very important, essential, that we have a success story because there's other corridors across this country that I think high-speed rail is viable.

"But here in the northeast corridor, that's where we should focus like a laser," he said.

Shuster said Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, is also enthusiastic about high-speed rail in the northeast corridor and has asked for "robust" funding targets for rail projects in the federal highway reauthorization bill. However, Shuster stressed that the state and federal governments need to partner with the private sector to help pay for the projects.

Shuster was the guest of honor at a forum held in Hartford and organized by Connecticut Rep. John Larson, co-chairman of the Northeast Rail Caucus. Members of both the Connecticut and Massachusetts congressional delegations, Connecticut Gov. Dannel P. Malloy and state transportation officials from Connecticut, Massachusetts and Vermont were on hand for the event.

The three states have been working together on a commuter rail line project that will run from New Haven to Hartford to Springfield, Mass., and

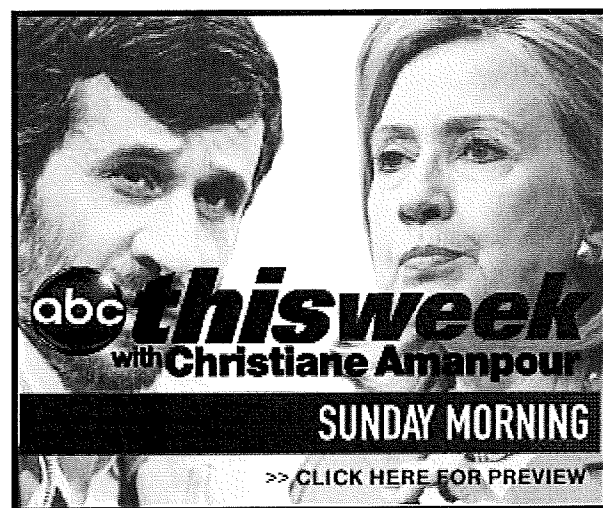
eventually into Vermont and as far north as Montreal.

Karen Songhurst, a policy analyst at the Vermont Agency of Transportation, said Amtrak stops eight miles shy of the Canadian border. She said the U.S. and Canada conduct an enormous amount of trade and that it makes sense to resume passenger rail travel. Amtrak announced in 1994 it was stopping the Montrealer for financial reasons.

Rep. John Olver, D-Mass., co-chairman of the northeast rail caucus, said the New Haven-to-Springfield rail line is the most important infrastructure project for the Connecticut River Valley.

"Today's meeting demonstrates our strong regional commitment to working together to support the expansion of passenger and freight opportunities," he said.

The New Haven-to-Springfield project is expected to cost \$800 million, said Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn. She said about \$160 million in federal funds have already been approved, coupled with \$280 million committed by the state of Connecticut. The remainder of the money could come from the federal highway bill and the federal transportation appropriations bill, she said.



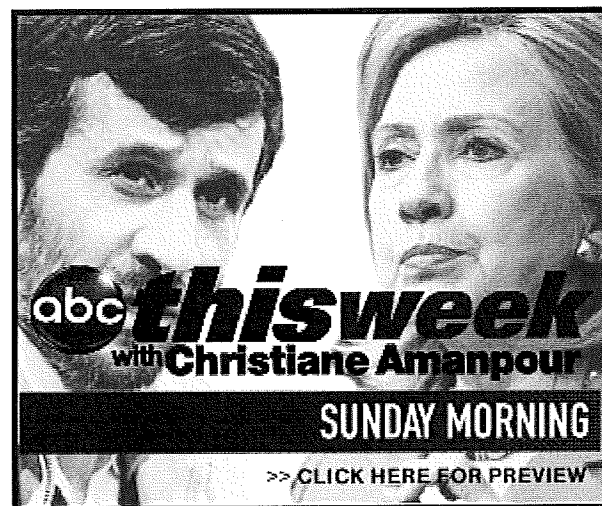
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"We're not that far away from completion, but we've got to use everything that's going to be available to us to make up the balance," DeLauro said.

Malloy said while he doesn't support borrowing money to pay for the state's operating expenses, he believes it's appropriate for the state to borrow money to invest in its infrastructure and pledged that Connecticut is ready to partner with the federal government to help find the necessary funds.



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Key GOP Congressman Backs High-Speed Rail Line In Connecticut

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HARTFORD —

Despite growing tea party opposition to high-speed train proposals, a powerful Republican congressman on Friday publicly endorsed building Connecticut's high-speed line as part of a larger Amtrak initiative.

U.S. Rep. Bill Shuster, the newly appointed chairman of the House railroad subcommittee, told a group of New England political leaders that he supports the proposed \$1 billion New Haven-to-Springfield line, envisioning it as part of a high-speed rail network that would link Boston, Montreal, Manhattan, Albany and Washington, D.C.

Schuster cited many points of dispute with the Obama administration's national rail plan, but said Republicans ought to get behind a vast upgrade of Amtrak's heavily used Boston-to-Washington line.

"It's important to the whole nation. I'm here in support of the Northeast Corridor. I believe it's good for America," Schuster told a crowd of dignitaries at a high-speed train summit at Hartford's Union Station.

He said he endorses the proposed 62-mile spur through Connecticut into western Massachusetts, the first leg of a network that eventually could link New England cities with Amtrak's main line.

"This is the most congested region in the country. High-speed rail here could be profitable," Schuster told an audience of Connecticut's top political leaders, including Gov. Dannel P. Malloy, Sen. Richard Blumenthal and most of the congressional delegation.

Schuster's support could go a long way in determining whether Connecticut's \$1 billion project gets built.

The Pennsylvania congressman last week replaced a Democrat as chairman of the House subcommittee on rail, and he'll have a significant role in drafting the next transportation funding reauthorization bill. Schuster emphasized that he wants New England to seek out private partners for its rail network, but didn't rule out endorsing more federal grants, either.

President Barack Obama had the backing of a Democratic Congress when he first handed out \$8 billion in seed money for high-speed train systems throughout the country.

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But that all changed with the November election. To get much further, the president now needs cooperation from Republicans such as Schuster and Rep. John Mica, R-Florida, the new chairman of the transportation committee. Both say they back high-speed rail along the Northeast Corridor because the region is so densely populated.

The conservative wing of the Republican Party, however, has zeroed in on high-speed trains as a government boondoggle.

New Republican governors in Ohio and Wisconsin have scuttled projects in their states, tea party activists are pressing Florida Gov. Rick Scott to abandon a proposed Tampa-to-Orlando route and some GOP congressmen are looking to slash funding for Amtrak as well as all high-speed train plans.

U.S. Rep. John Larson, D-1st District, a longtime advocate for the New Haven-to-Springfield line, is working to keep those critics from derailing Connecticut's line.

"This is not about Democrats and Republicans. This is about trains," said Larson. "This is about jobs."

The most imminent threat is the possibility that Congress might try to rescind Obama's seed grants, including a recent \$120 million award for Connecticut.

Larson orchestrated Friday's meeting, bringing together transportation chiefs from Vermont and Massachusetts along with U.S. Reps. Rosa DeLauro, Chris Murphy and Joe Courtney, to pitch their case to Schuster personally.

"If we're going to produce jobs that can't be outsourced, this is critical to our state," DeLauro said.

"We're here for what passes as a transportation pep rally," Blumenthal said. "For every argument in favor of high-speed rail and transportation efficiency, there are efforts to cut spending and hollow out the program. We are determined to fight."

Chris Donovan, speaker of the state House, told Schuster that robust rail service through the heart of the state would slow suburban sprawl and re-energize cities by attracting residential and business development around the stations.

"We're starting to lose our rural areas. We can preserve them and revitalize our urban areas," Donovan said.

Schuster emphasized that he disagrees with Obama's suggestion in the State of the Union address that 80 percent of Americans should have access to high-speed trains. Regions with smaller populations and lighter densities are unsuitable, he said. Building there would saddle taxpayers with huge annual operating subsidies.

Malloy didn't disagree.

"I, too, question the 80 percent. I'm wondering just about 1 percent — Connecticut's population," Malloy said with a brief smile.

"Connecticut is the most urbanized of the 50 states. We have 3.3 million people and five cities with 100,000 or more. There's no place better to do this," Malloy said. "This will be one of our main economic drivers for the next 35 to 40 years."

Schuster said that he and Mica agree, and added that they won over a few skeptical freshmen Republican congressmen during an Amtrak trip from the Capitol to Manhattan on Thursday. Part of the appeal of better train service in the Northeast is more efficient air travel throughout the nation, he said.

"Seventy percent of flight delays in the country originate in the Northeast. I tell that to my [Republican] colleagues."

James Redeker of the state Department of Transportation told Schuster that better train service is crucial to coping with crushing traffic delays and projections for rising populations in Greater New York and New England states. Airports and interstate highways are already overtaxed, he said.

"There is no solution in the highway side or on the air side," Redeker said. "There's no solution but high-speed rail."

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News

Conn. congressional delegation considers high-speed rail issues

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By Mary E. O'Leary, Topics Editor
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HARTFORD — The Republican chairman of an important subcommittee on rail issues is a big booster of high speed rail in the Northeast, as well as the New Haven-Springfield line, giving hope to the state's congressional delegation.

U.S. Rep. William Shuster, R-Pa., a new key player on these issues, talked up Northeast corridor improvements Friday as the best economic investment with the quickest potential turnaround of any rail improvement plan in the country and the only viable option that will also reduce airline congestion.

U.S. Rep. John Larson, D-1, who is co-chairman of the House Northeast Rail Caucus, arranged the meeting with Shuster and most of the state's congressional delegation, as well as business leaders, in a roundtable discussion at Hartford's Union Station. It's a new world for Democrats after the House flipped to majority Republican in the November elections.

The participants agreed the key is a full 5-year reauthorization of the federal transportation plan and creation of a national infrastructure bank, which looks to a public-private partnership, similar to what Europe is doing — a plan being pushed by U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-3.

"We need to have them (the private sector) at the table. We need to bring their expertise, their capital to his project," Shuster said.

For the current high speed rail project in Connecticut, DeLauro said \$160 million is coming from the federal government and \$280 million from the state out of some \$800 million needed. She said the first step is to make sure there are no rescissions in the stimulus funds dedicated to rail. Beyond that she hopes money is included in the highway and appropriation bills.

She called the project "imminently doable ... this is not pie in the sky."

DeLauro said if the U.S. does not grab private investment for rail, it will continue to go overseas to China and India. "We have to get into the 21st century," DeLauro said, who noted the U.S. invests only 2 percent of gross domestic product in infrastructure, to 9 percent by China and 5 percent by India.

U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2, said the current financing mechanism for transportation projects, which is based on the federal gas tax, is collapsing.

With higher mileage cars and people driving less, the revenue stream can't even maintain current spending levels,

Courtney said, and he criticized the Obama administration for not taking up the highway bill right after the health care bill.

"If this guy can do that bill, that's pulling a rabbit out of a hat," Courtney said of Shuster, whose district in Pennsylvania would not benefit from the Northeast corridor plan, but who sees it as imperative to economic recovery.

Shuster has his work cut out for him however, as he has to convince about half the House GOP members who do not feel rail investment is a federal responsibility.

Not that he is developing a strategy for continuing Republican domination in the House, but Courtney said if the GOP moves the transportation bill forward, "that would be a huge plus for their retaining the majority. This is one place you can get labor and business together. It is a super popular idea," Courtney said. "We (Democrats) blew it."

Oz Griebel, former GOP contender for governor, and executive director of the Metro Hartford Alliance, said business understands the state has to step up its contribution to transportation projects with either an increase in the state gas tax or electronic tolls at the borders.

Gov. Dannel P. Malloy, in answer to a question, said the budget he has to develop by Feb. 16 will concentrate on getting the state back on an even keel and out of its projected \$3.7 billion deficit.

He predicted additional discussions on energy and transportation will take place later in the spring, as they are issues that demand concentrated attention.

Larson said transportation investment in the Northeast, whose population is as dense as Western Europe and where the infrastructure footprint already exists, will be a big job creator for a construction industry where unemployment is reaching 30 percent.

To his Republican critics, Shuster said he points to the Constitution, which mandates that Congress provide for the security of the country, protect interstate commerce and build "post roads." Shuster said rail is the modern equivalent of post roads.

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