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How Not to Plan for the Future

The agreement between Congress and the White House to virtually eliminate money for high-speed rail is harebrained. France, China, Brazil, even Russia, understand that high-speed rail is central to future development. Not Washington.

The budget package eliminated about \$1 billion that President Obama had wanted to add to the current budget, and it rescinded \$400 million of \$2.4 billion that was already designated for high-speed rail this year.

That money was supposed to go to Florida, but it's now up for grabs after Gov. Rick Scott mindlessly rejected a plan to build the first high-speed rail corridor between Orlando and Tampa. Despite the vast support of business, Governor Scott claimed it would be too costly for the state government. It turns out that a lot of other governors — including 11 of Mr. Scott's Republican colleagues — would love that money.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood has to choose among 90 proposals from 24 states, the District of Columbia and Amtrak — \$10 billion worth in all. The real scandal is that Washington won't pay most of them.

Two areas stand out on that list: the Northeast corridor from Boston to Washington; and California, which has ambitions to build a high-speed rail system from San Francisco and Sacramento to San Diego. California voters have approved almost \$10 billion in bonds for the project (which has an ultimate price tag of some \$45 billion), but the state wants the \$2 billion for an extension.

That is a promising project, for later. The overall price is not practical now, and the Northeast already has the fastest train in the country, the Acela, which is running on tracks that do not allow it to reach its full speed.

Amtrak, backed by regional governors, is asking for \$1.3 billion that would help speed up Acela trains. Some would go to signal, electrical and track improvements to boost the Acela's speed from 135 miles per hour to 160 m.p.h. in a long stretch between Philadelphia and New

York City. New York has another request to clear a path for Acela through an overloaded exchange near New York City's Pennsylvania Station. Right now more than 750 Long Island Rail Road, Amtrak and New Jersey Transit trains pass through there daily.

Other requests in the Northeast proposal include money for Amtrak to start work on two tunnels under the Hudson River. Those tunnels, vital to rail and road travel through the region, would replace a project that New Jersey's governor, Chris Christie, canceled last year, costing his state \$3 billion in federal funds.

After making that terrible mistake, Mr. Christie now says he wants \$570 million in funds to replace another choke point for the Acela — the 100-year-old Portal Bridge across the Hackensack River. He is even willing to put up \$150 million of state money, since the bridge is also used by New Jersey commuter trains. In his letter asking for federal funds, he lamented that the bridge, which swings open for river traffic, is "beyond its useful life" and delays trains. That's rich coming from the man who canceled a project that was vital to ending train delays in the future.

There are many requests, even one from Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin, a Republican who earlier rejected \$810 million of these funds. Now he wants \$150 million for a modest rail project between Milwaukee and Chicago.

President Obama originally proposed spending more than \$50 billion over the next six years to make America's passenger rails compete with other industrialized nations. He wants 80 percent of the nation to have access to high-speed rail in 25 years. That's not likely to happen with this Congress. Perhaps Governors Christie and Walker, and other Republicans who have a sudden fervor for high-speed rail, can help make his case.