

**Subject:** DOT seeks companies to finance high-speed rail

WASHINGTON -- The Department of Transportation is seeking private companies to finance and build high-speed passenger rail service between New York and Washington and along 10 other corridors, including Chicago. Acting under a bill Congress passed this year, the department has asked for "expressions of interest" for projects to provide fast-train transit in 11 federally designated routes nationwide, Transportation Secretary Mary Peters said.

"For it to work, it must be viable, efficient and competitive," Peters said at a news conference in Manhattan's Pennsylvania Station, in promoting the search for proposals due Sept. 30. "Such a system would offer public benefits all of us would like to see: reduced demand on congested highways, reduced fossil emissions and decreased fuel consumption."

The government wants to cut the rail time between New York and Washington by one-third, to two hours. Amtrak's Acela Express, the only so-called high-speed train in the U.S., carries 3.5 million riders a year and averages less than 83 m.p.h. Trains from London, Paris, Brussels and cities in Japan exceed 180 m.p.h.

Rail consumes 17 percent less energy per passenger mile than airlines and 21 percent less than cars, according to the Transportation Department.

Florida Republican John Mica, the ranking member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, has criticized Amtrak for taking losses on selling food and beverages and for Acela service breakdowns.

In 2006, he requested a government study that found Amtrak was overcharged or double-billed for legal services and couldn't account for much of its spending.

"High-speed rail is a proven success in nations across Europe and Asia," Mica said. "Yet, the United States lacks a single true high-speed rail route."

The other designated high-speed corridors include areas of California, the Pacific Northwest, the Southern-Central U.S., the Gulf Coast, Chicago and neighboring cities, Florida, Pennsylvania, Northern New England, the Southeast U.S. and between Buffalo and Albany, N.Y., according to the department.

While the transportation bill calls for the creation of a commission to review proposals by November 2009 and for recommendations to be released by February 2010, there's no schedule for financing or constructing a high-speed system.

The bill authorizes \$5 million for preliminary engineering studies for each proposal recommended to Congress by the commission.

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