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ISSUE IN-DEPTH: HIGH-SPEED RAIL

Our Editorial Board's Opinion: Georgia can't afford to miss this train

By Jay Bookman
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The Obama administration has committed to spend \$13 billion over the next five years jump-starting high-speed rail projects. But it's an opportunity that Atlanta is likely to miss, at least this time around.

Geographically speaking, the metro region is situated perfectly. It stands at the intersection of two federally designated rail corridors: The Gulf Coast Corridor, which would link Houston, New Orleans, Mobile, Birmingham and Atlanta; and the Southeast Corridor, which links Atlanta north to Washington through Charlotte; and southeast to Jacksonville.

But politically and bureaucratically, we're located far from the real action. California and Florida, among other states, are well ahead of Georgia in planning and preparation for high-speed rail.

Virginia and North Carolina, for example, created the Virginia-North Carolina Interstate High-Speed Rail Commission in 2001. Using federal and state funds, they have since invested heavily in engineering and environmental impact studies of high-speed rail linking Charlotte, Richmond and Washington.

By comparison, Georgia's preparation hasn't gotten much beyond feasibility studies. A report released in August estimated it would cost \$2.5 billion to connect Macon, Atlanta and Charlotte with rail capable of traveling 150 mph. The trip would take 3 1/2 hours, and in the early years, fares would fall short of covering the cost of operation and maintenance, requiring taxpayer subsidies. The line would be publicly financed but privately operated.

"The states in the corridor need to develop a political consensus concerning innovative ways to pay for capital costs and initial operating deficits," the report warned, suggesting that "a dedicated funding source, e.g., a sales tax increment, might be considered."

That's a daunting challenge, particularly here in Georgia, where state leaders have adopted a deep disdain for any major government initiative, especially if it involves taxes.

From our country's earliest days, however, government has invested in roads, bridges, canals and, later, railroads and airports to build infrastructure that private industry could use to conduct business.

Atlanta exists today largely because the Georgia Legislature voted in 1836 to finance construction of a railroad linking this area to Tennessee. A century later, Atlanta Mayor William B. Hartsfield and other city leaders invested heavily in an airport that is now the world's busiest and a powerful economic engine.

If Georgia leaders are no longer willing to make such big investments, those in other regions are less shy. One of the biggest advocates of high-speed rail in Virginia, for example, is Eric Cantor, the conservative House Republican whip.

"It is estimated that creating a high-speed railway through Virginia will generate as many as 185,500 jobs, as much as \$21.2 billion in economic development, and pull nearly 6.5 million cars off the road annually," Cantor noted in a recent letter to Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. "Providing a high-speed rail service from Washington, D.C., to Richmond will drive economic development throughout our region for many years to come."

That economic development angle is critical to judging the value of a high-speed rail network. Not coincidentally, the route of the proposed Southeast Rail Corridor runs along the backbone of what Catherine Ross, a planning expert at Georgia Tech, calls the Piedmont Atlantic MegaRegion. The cities within that megaregion — stretching from Birmingham through Atlanta to Charlotte and Raleigh — prosper by exchanging goods, people, information and services. The more quickly and easily that commerce occurs, the more competitive the megaregion will become.

Atlanta, for instance, serves as the region's logistics center, while Charlotte serves as its banker. As one

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