



## MY VIEW, Charles Ball: Curious case of high-speed rail in America

Published: Sunday, January 22, 2012, 5:32 AM



By **Special to The Birmingham News**

**By Charles Ball**



Charles Ball

Before we begin to celebrate the imminent death of California's much-maligned high-speed passenger rail project and similar projects, let's make sure we understand all of the implications of the "no-build" decision.

- **First, cost.** For the record, President Barack Obama's \$53 billion high-speed rail plan, which the California plan fit prominently into, represents about three-tenths of one percent of our \$15 trillion gross domestic product. By comparison, the \$25 billion authorized in 1956 for the construction of the interstate highway system would be the equivalent of \$204 billion today. That \$25 billion amounted to roughly 6 percent of our 1956 GDP. Six percent of today's \$15 trillion economy would be \$900 billion.

And, by the way, in 1956, our leaders voted to increase the federal gas tax by 8 cents to service bonds for the interstates. That would be the equivalent of 64 cents today.

Also, Obama's proposal is dwarfed by our \$700 billion in oil imports since 2008. That's \$700 billion that will help build some other country's infrastructure, and spent without much protest or national soul-searching.

If California's \$100 billion rail project had been financed like most of our large infrastructure projects, the feds would be picking up 80 percent of the cost, and California and local governments would be covering the rest. We have built everything from the Cumberland Road to the Transcontinental Railroad to our major airports and seaports to the interstates in this fashion.

California transportation officials estimate that without high-speed rail, they must spend \$177 billion over the next 40 years to expand their interstates and airports to accommodate population growth.

- **Technology arrogance.** High-speed rail systems have been deployed on three continents, in countries

along the entire ideological spectrum, from capitalistic to communistic, and in countries that are home to corporations we count as part of Alabama's corporate community like Germany, Japan and Spain. However, the tone of discussions in America surrounding this technology suggests we know something those other countries do not. It suggests we are so much more technologically advanced that we have nothing to learn from them.

This is in the country that imported its initial railroad technology from England; that secretly secured its early space technology from Germany through Wernher von Braun; that used Germany's Autobahn as the inspiration for the design of its interstate system. Now, we are facing an advanced transportation technology that is giving us hives. It is illogical.

• **The human cost of "no-build."** We pride ourselves in having more choices than citizens of just about every other country. Yet, we are surprisingly accepting of our limited transportation options, and Americans are dying because of it.

Since 1960, more than 1.5 million of our relatives, neighbors, co-workers and friends have died on our highways. That is the equivalent of losing all the people in Metropolitan Nashville. In Alabama alone, we have lost more than 50,000 residents during that time (about 1,000 per year), or the equivalent of everyone in Auburn or Decatur.

These deaths occur so frequently, they have become like incidents of violent crime; as long as they are experienced by some other family, we don't give it much thought. We tell ourselves these are the inevitable consequences of our car culture.

But it is anything but inevitable. We have made a collective choice not to invest in our nation's mass-transit infrastructure. Fortunately, we can also choose to do things differently and save lives in the process.

• **Picking winners.** In a recent issue of *The Atlantic Monthly-Cities*, journalist Eric Jaffe compared the vociferous public debate surrounding the California project and similar projects to discussions raging 150 years ago in America. Back then, the debates were between supporters of the well-established and popular canal systems of the day and proponents of the upstart railroad industry. Jaffe pondered how different our country would be if the canal supporters had prevailed.

The death of high-speed rail efforts in California and other places in American suggests we are choosing to break with tradition and play it safe.

*Charles Ball is executive director of the Regional Planning Commission of Greater Birmingham. Email: **CBall@RPCGB.ORG.***

© 2012 al.com. All rights reserved.