

DEVELOPING HIGH-SPEED RAIL FOR NORTHEAST CORRIDOR FOCUS OF CONGRESSIONAL HEARING

January 26, 2011

Washington, DC – A Congressional hearing on developing true high-speed passenger rail service in the Northeast Corridor will be held at Grand Central Station in New York City on Thursday.

The Northeast Corridor is one of the nation's most valuable infrastructure assets. The hearing follows a House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee report released in October entitled "Sitting on Our Assets: The Federal Government's Misuse of Taxpayer-Owned Assets." The report includes examples of underutilized and mismanaged federal assets, and highlights the failure to develop true high-speed service in the Northeast Corridor.

The Committee's Chairman, U.S. Rep. John L. Mica (R-FL), will conduct Thursday's Congressional field hearing. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and former Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell are among the witnesses scheduled to testify. The significant need for private sector participation and resources in developing, financing, constructing and operating high-speed rail will be a point of focus at Thursday's hearing. Amtrak's Acela service travels at an average of only 83 mph between New York and Washington, DC, well below world standards for high-speed.

WHAT:

Congressional Field Hearing: "Developing True High-Speed Rail to the Northeast Corridor: Stop Sitting on Our Federal Assets"

WHEN:

January 27, 2011; 10:00 AM

WHERE:

Grand Central Terminal, Northeast Balcony, New York, New York

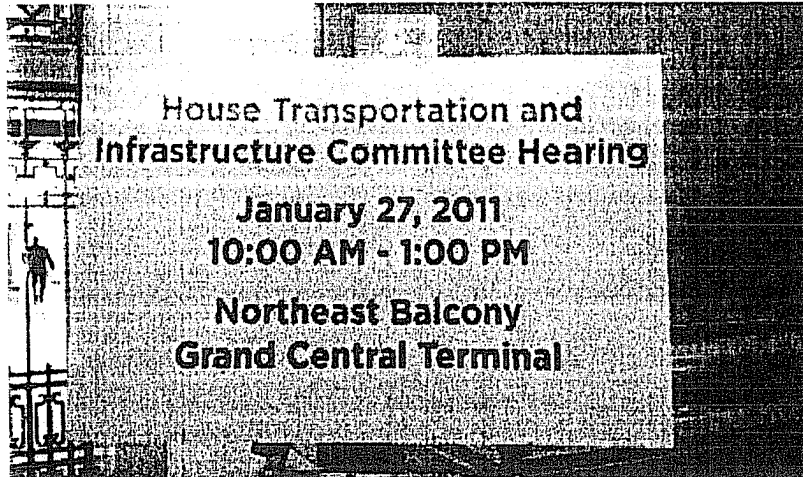
**** NOTE **** *Hearing space is limited. Members of the media are asked to keep equipment at a minimum. Also, TV crews and others must supply own power source.*

WITNESSES:

- New York Mayor Hon. Michael Bloomberg
- Hon. Ed Rendell, Co-Chair of Building America's Future and Former Governor of Pennsylvania
- Mr. Thomas Hart, U.S. High Speed Rail
- Ms. Petra Todorovich, Business Alliance for Northeast Mobility
- Mr. Perry Offutt, Managing Director, Morgan Stanley
- Mr. Robert Scardelletti, International President, Transportation Communications International Union

Following the hearing, Members of the Committee and representatives of the U.S. Department of Transportation, Amtrak, Northeast Corridor State governments, the financial sector, and rail labor will continue the discussion in a roundtable meeting. This meeting is scheduled for 1:00 PM to 2:30 PM in the Metropolitan Transportation Authority Board Room, Grand Central Terminal.

Members of the media who plan to cover Thursday's Committee events please contact Justin Harclerode at 202-226-8767.



(photo by Kate Hinds)

(New York, NY — Kate Hinds, Transportation Nation) **UPDATED WITH RENDELL COMMENTS** Two days after President Obama called for bringing high-speed rail to 80% of Americans in 25 years, his approach was criticized as being too slow—and too diffuse—to make an impact.

The House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure held a field hearing this morning at Grand Central Terminal with the title “Developing True High Speed Rail in the Northeast Corridor — Stop Sitting on Our Federal Assets.” Despite the snow, more than a dozen members of Congress came out to hear witnesses like New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and former Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell testify in support of high-speed rail.

Committee Chair John Mica (R-FL) kicked things off by saying that the Northeast Corridor is “one of the most valuable and potentially productive federal assets in the United States—and that the Boston-to- DC corridor is home to 20% of the nation’s population. But Mica said the government’s current high-speed rail plans are on a “slow-speed schedule.”



John Mica, center, chairing a House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee meeting at Grand Central Terminal (Kate Hinds)

“This is our nation’s most congested corridor, on land and in the air,” he said. “And 70% of our chronically delayed air flights in the country — 70%, get this— start right here in the New York airspace.” If high-speed rail can take some of the pressure off short-hop flights, he said, it would ease up air traffic.

But Mica had harsh words for Amtrak, saying that federally-funded rail provider is not the entity that will bring America to the promised land of a fast train that will bring passengers from New York to Washington in under two hours.

“Let me tell you — this is my 19th year of following Amtrak — (it will) never be capable of developing the corridor to its true high-speed potential,” he said. “The task is too complex and too large-scale, and can only be addressed with the help of private sector expertise...and also (Amtrak) will never get the funding for it with the plan they’ve currently proposed.”

Mayor Bloomberg (who showed up late to the hearing because, in his words, “*I’ve been up since 4:30 this morning implementing the Mayor’s program to prevent a drought this summer. Some people call it snow, but we have to look on the bright side*”) said that he was a huge booster of high-speed rail. And while he lauded the President’s plans to allocate \$10 billion for it, he criticized the money as not being efficiently targeted.

“I understand the politics, everybody in this country wants to pull together, everybody contributes, and everybody wants to get the benefits,” Bloomberg said. “But in some cases the benefits are going to be in one part of the country and then spill over to the others. Other endeavors, like the interstate highway system, and building airports— every city can share in that. But high-speed rail really only fits for certain parts of the country. But it’s something that’s good for all of us.” He said that we needed to “make sure we have the structure and rules in place that don’t discourage private investment.”

This worried some, like labor leader Robert Scardelletti, who said “we do not understand how the public will benefit by allowing a private operator to take over one of Amtrak’s most successful routes.” He also referred to the omnipresent comparisons between the United States and China. “They won’t need any environmental study. In fact, they don’t need anything...I don’t believe it’s proper for our government to compare ourselves to a Communist regime.”

“The Chinese must be doing something right,” Mayor Bloomberg snapped, “because they’re the ones that are loaning us the money so we can subsidize things like Amtrak, where if you took the amount of money we spent on Amtrak, divide it by the number of riders and offer everybody that amount of money if they walked, they’d mostly walk! This is ridiculous!”

But it seemed like everyone was on board with prioritizing Boston-to-Washington. As Governor Rendell said: “Making significant investments in the Northeast Corridor to achieve true high speed rail must be our number one priority. No other corridor in the country has the population density and ridership as well as the economic wherewithal to result in successful and likely profitable, high speed rail line....The Northeast Corridor will demonstrate the value of these investments to our entire nation.”