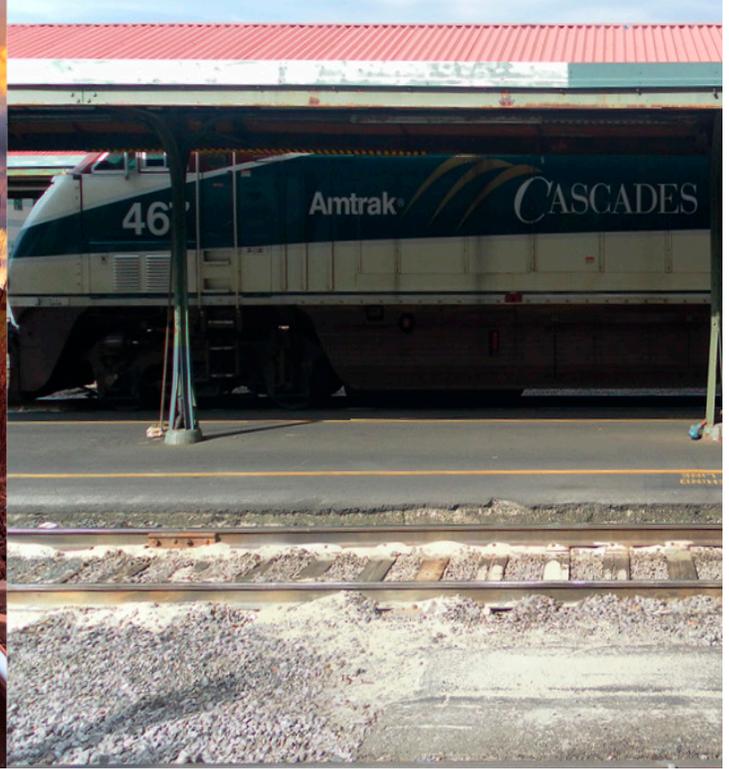
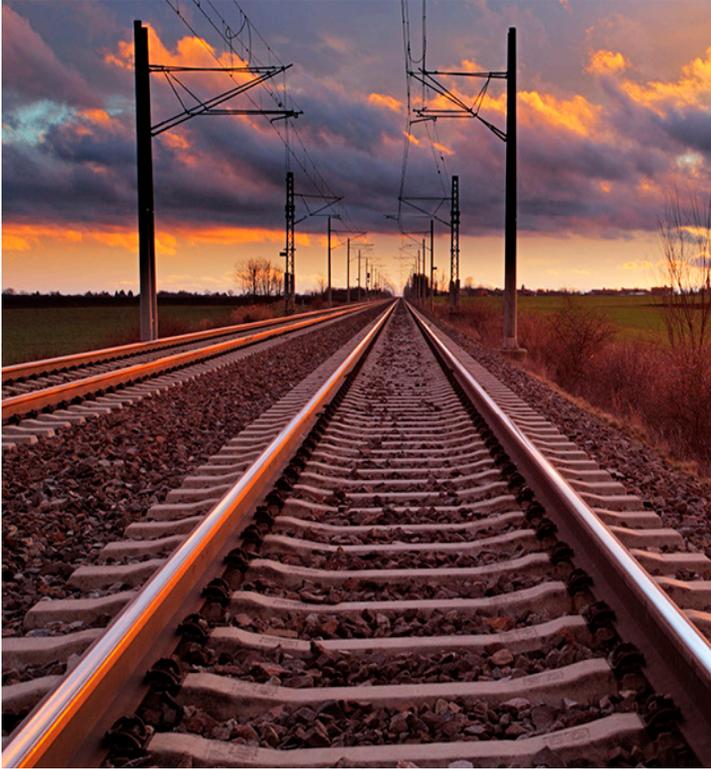


A Geographical Contribution on Interurban Passenger Rail Transportation in the United States

Project 2212
February 2022

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Why does the rail infrastructure of the United States lag behind those of many other developed countries? Is the nation condemned to remain without a high-speed rail (HSR) network? These two questions launched this research, which sought to improve understanding of the specific conditions and difficulties of deploying new rail strategies and high-speed rail. This research analyzes two aspects of intercity passenger rail in the United States: Amtrak's conventional rail services and high-speed rail projects to understand public policies that affect rail, including how the policies are developed and implemented by various stakeholders.

Study Methods

This research analyzed existing grey literature, including institutional documents to understand the objects of study, to characterize the content of the policies and projects studied, and to identify the goals and rationales of the various actors. This research employs a wide variety of documents from institutional, non-

institutional, and economic actors (e.g., federal sources, Amtrak, state sources, regional and local actors (MPO), municipalities, transportation authorities, Rail Passengers Association, American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials).

Additionally, several series of interviews (a total of forty semi-structured interviews) were conducted from 2015 to 2017 during three phases of field research and in a continuous thread via Skype, phone, and a Google Forms questionnaire. Together, these interviews constituted a considerable amount of new information—although after the interviews had been transcribed and processed, it became apparent that certain stock answers were regularly given to certain questions, usually answers drawn from institutional documentation and communication materials. This was particularly true for the interviews about ongoing projects (California, Florida), which perhaps required interviewees to be particularly cautious in responding to requests from the academic world.

The team also collected background information and data on Amtrak's current rail services and the rail projects under consideration, as well as on the territorial context of the three case studies (San Francisco Bay Area, Northwest/Cascadia, South Florida). This covers the socio-demographic and economic context, as well as transportation and mobility (infrastructure and services, modal split, regional and urban ridership, modal comparison information on provision, frequency, and fares). Finally, the team conducted field observations to understand local urban conditions and to obtain a close-up view of ongoing projects, particularly projects for stations and station districts.

Findings

Analysis confirmed that a policy in favor of high-speed rail is emerging, driven by a coalescence of public and private stakeholders rather than by the establishment of a national plan for the development of high-speed rail.

The research team hypothesized that a policy paradigm shift would contribute to the emergence and implementation of policies favorable to passenger rail. Analysis shows: first, a standardization of the argument encouraging new rail policies (structuring effects, economic role of high speed, tackling congestion, modal shift); second, a tangible commitment at all levels but to varying degrees by public actors in favor of rail. However, this paradigm shift is limited by the lack of visibility of technical and administrative rail culture; second, institutional and political limitations, including governmental public policy frameworks favoring personal vehicles; and third, a strong disconnect between formal political commitments, which are present in both grey literature and speeches, and the reality of the jurisdiction of various stakeholders.

This research also found an emergence of an original policy for high-speed rail in the United States. Three findings emerge from the analyses: (1) there is a hybridization of technical arrangements for the implementation of high-speed intercity rail services; (2) the emergence of a high degree of territorial selectivity with respect to the construction of high-speed lines; (3) regionalized strategies for high-speed rail are being implemented in the United States that take into account local specificities.

Policy/Practice Recommendations

This research makes it possible to identify some initial public policy recommendations such as: create a real funding program for high-speed rail and intercity rail (in the same way as the Trust Funds for highway or airport modes); initiate a multi-year programming of major infrastructure projects; increase investments under the U.S. ecological transition; encourage the creation of new coalitions of actors or new scales of action to support these major infrastructures (regional structures, megaregions); launch a new multimodal strategy for passenger transportation to encourage the connection of networks and the articulation between local, regional, and intercity transportation networks.

The main finding that runs through all the scales and case studies embraced in this research is that Although the existing frameworks of public action in the United States overwhelmingly favor personal vehicles, public policy is shifting toward embracing high-speed rail.

About the Author

Matthieu Schorung has a PhD in Transport Geography and Urban Planning (University of Paris-Est, France, 2019). His work focuses on transport policies in the United States and urban planning around nodal infrastructures (rail stations mainly). He is currently a postdoctoral researcher in the research chair Logistics City (University of Gustave Eiffel, France) working on warehousing location and logistics sprawl and on the spatial impacts of e-commerce in American and European cities.

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MTI is a University Transportation Center sponsored by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Research and Technology and by Caltrans. The Institute is located within San José State University's Lucas Graduate School of Business.