



Michigan's Interstate Traveler envisions a new railway.

About 30 years ago, Sandor "Sandy" Shapery saw a *Nova* television show about trains that cruised on magnetic cushions at mind-boggling speed instead of chugging along on steel wheels. Impressed by the revolutionary technology, the southern Californian decided to keep a close eye on their progress, waiting for the day when that innovative promise on display three decades ago could be fulfilled.

Future block

Can private enterprise get maglev trains moving in the U.S.?

by **Curt Guyette**
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That day came in 2004, when an 18-mile maglev train line opened between Shanghai's financial district on China's east coast and the city's Pudong Airport. At speeds of 300 mph, that trip now takes eight minutes.

Shapery, a highly successful San Diego developer of hotels and office complexes, has been actively pushing for maglev - short for magnetic levitation - in his region since the Shanghai line began operation.

It is, he says, the future of transportation, offering the potential to relieve congestion on overcrowded freeways and at airports operating at capacity. It also helps address the problems of air pollution and fossil-fuel reliance.

The government-built Shanghai line relies on equipment and technology produced through a joint public-private German venture. That project was Shapery's tipping point.

"I had decided I would jump in with both feet when the first commercial system began operating anywhere in the world," Shapery says. "Unless you already have a proven system, no one's going to stick their neck out and support an experimental project."

With Shanghai to point to, Shapery was ready to move ahead. He launched a nonprofit dedicated to promoting construction of a maglev system in his home state. He's not alone. Including his project, there are five different maglev proposals being considered by government agencies in Southern California. Shapery's goal now is to see those proposals transformed from competing ventures to an integrated plan.

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Key to that plan is using maglev to move freight as well as people. While construction costs are daunting, operating costs are predicted to be about half the cost of traditional rail, making it far cheaper in the long run, Shapery says. Because of that, the private sector has shown considerable interest in coming on board. Shapery contends that the project he's promoting, which would link five southern California airports, could be constructed entirely with private-sector funds.

Officials from southern California recently returned from Shanghai "impressed" by the technology they saw. "I think it's very viable," Los Angeles City Councilman Greg Smith told the Copley News Service in July. (A recent fire on the line gives ammo to critics, but is considered inconsequential by proponents.)

It's not only California that's put study of a maglev system on a forward track. Other projects under consideration include those in western Pennsylvania and the Washington, D.C.-Baltimore corridor. Those two studies have federal support.

But in the greater Detroit area, consideration of such advanced technology is largely absent from any debate regarding mass transit.

"Our consultant looked at maglev very, very early on and decided that it wasn't an appropriate thing to look at for this corridor," says Carmine Palombo, director of transportation for the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), which commissioned the study in its role as the entity overseeing transit projects in this region.

For one thing, Palombo says, the relative density in metro Detroit is not high enough to justify the costs of maglev. Also, that this is still considered an emerging technology was a disincentive.

Even the mainstream of this area's transit progressives isn't making a push for maglev. That's not because they think the technology lacks promise. Instead, they see a combination of regional obstacles and disinterest on the part of the Bush administration serving as an effective roadblock.

"We're still having a debate over whether mass transit will even work here," says Megan Owens, executive director of the nonprofit activist group Transportation Riders United. That debate, she says, is akin to the one going on over global warming. Nearly everyone in the know acknowledges that it is happening and needs to be addressed, but the concerted efforts of a small number of obstructionists is enough to prevent progress.

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The same is true here regarding transit issues. "It's ridiculous that there's still even a debate, because the conclusion is obvious." Owens says. "But because there's a few [factions] that want to keep it going, we're still debating the 'if' instead of debating how, where and when."

It doesn't help that the U.S. government under the Bush presidency has decimated maglev funding. The transportation bill approved in 1997 authorized spending up to \$950 million in federal funds on maglev by the Federal Railroad Administration. Last year, that earmark was reduced to \$90 million.

"The position of the Bush administration is that we do not favor maglev," Railroad Administration spokesman Steve Kulm recently told the industry publication *The Bond Buyer*. "We feel that the money could be better spent on resolving other transportation issues, like local transit, highway projects and airports."

Given all that, says Owens, local activists are pursuing the options that have the highest potential in terms of funding. "We need to figure out what the government is willing to support," she explains.

To a degree, though, it is an approach that causes her some grief.

"If you look at what's happening in other countries, they are so far ahead of where we are in terms of transportation technologies," Owens says. "It's sad and disconcerting that this region, which was a transportation leader for so long, is not even willing to consider cutting-edge alternatives."

John Harding, the chief maglev technologist for maglev with the Federal Railroad Administration before his retirement a few years ago, says that there's "no doubt we're behind the curve on these advanced technologies."

One reason is opposition from entrenched special interests, such as the U.S. auto industry. But relying on adding more highway lanes as the solution to our transit problems is an approach "that will eventually fail," he says.

There's also the inherent difficulty in getting politicians to pursue innovative projects, Harding says. When it comes to expensive, innovative efforts that will take years to bring to fruition, he says, public officials "don't see an advantage to taking a risk."

"But," he adds, "I think the main reason we're backing off [of maglev] is that there are so many other things that require resources that it's not considered a high enough priority. If you didn't have this war in Iraq and so on, projects like maglev would probably still be on the table."

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Like San Diego's Shapery, the Detroit area's Justin Sutton believes maglev offers an economic model so attractive it can be built using strictly private sector money. But, unlike Shapery, he's promoting a system that has yet to be built anywhere.

As founder of Interstate Traveler, he's designed an innovative system that uses solar energy and hydrogen fuel cells in a unique combination that, if proven, would be revolutionary. He's assembled investors he says are committed to backing the project, and is pushing ahead with plans that require no government investment.

With the Michigan House and Senate having passed resolutions in support of the company, and Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick recently issuing a letter providing his endorsement, Sutton's company seeks to have its first project be construction of a line along the Ann Arbor-Detroit corridor. As with the model being pursued in Southern California, Sutton envisions a system that will move freight as well as people. (You can learn more about his project at interstatetraveler.us.)

Sutton is convinced that the question isn't "if" his vision will become a reality, but rather "when."

And when it does, he says, "It will make everybody in the world look to Detroit again as the leader in transportation."

At this point though, his vision remains just that - a vision. The reality is that, from the Oval Office down to the offices over at SEMCOG, our transit future is largely being looked at through a rearview mirror.

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