

## Viewpoints, Outlook

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### There is a high-speed rail connection we are missing

By NEAL PEIRCE

"We've just passed the 300 million mark, evidence of America's dynamism. But the only policy response has been to build a \$700 million wall along the Mexican border. How dumb!"

And the problem, adds Robert Yaro, president of the New York Regional Plan Association, isn't that walls — from the Great Wall of China to the Berlin Wall — almost always fail. It's that agonizing over immigration and overcrowding, we miss the real issue: How do we accommodate the growth — about 120 million more Americans, both immigrants and children of today's Americans — we know is virtually certain by 2050?

Just as the 20th century began with geographically contained cities that gradually expanded into metropolitan areas, it's now expected that 70 percent of our coming population and economic growth will take place in 10 American "megaregions." Each is a network of metro regions, sharing environmental systems and transportation networks that are far beyond the capacity of any individual metro region to manage. Examples of the nation's already heavily populated, increasingly interconnected megaregions include the Northeast Corridor (Virginia to Maine), the Great Lakes, Florida (Orlando-Tampa-Miami), and Southern California (Los Angeles-San Diego).

The European Union grasped the new reality in the 1990s, creating so-called structural and cohesion funds that have channeled billions into transportation, telecommunications and human skills programs across broad megaregions. A prime example: new high-speed rail systems, linked to the English Channel tunnel, in an effort to connect the prosperous London-Frankfurt-Amsterdam-Milan corridor with slower growth city regions (Madrid and Athens, Manchester, and now Warsaw, for example) on the EU's periphery.

Check Japan, South Korea and a number of soon-to-be-industrial nations, notes Yaro, and massive, strategic, megaregion-wide infrastructure investments are under way, putting current U.S. efforts to shame. In the hopes that we may catch up, Yaro and a number of other regional leaders and academic and business analysts have formed a new organization, America 2050, to help policy-makers — state and local, and hopefully federal — to focus on megaregions as the building blocks of 21st-century national success.

Part of the idea is purely practical. Late-20th-century America was built around the interstate highway system of limited-access roads perfect for regions 30 to 60 miles across, notes Kip Bergstrom, executive director of the Rhode Island Economic Policy

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Council and an active participant in America 2050. But in megaregions 300 to 500 miles across, he observes, roads can't cut it — they lack enough capacity, and travel times are too great. Time getting to and from airports makes air travel inefficient for such distances. So the United States has to look to high-speed rail — the new transportation form being embraced by virtually all rapidly developing areas of the world except the United States.

In the Northeast, Yaro bemoans, "we'd at least like to have an Acela service that works," a start at stronger links for such lagging cities as Philadelphia, Baltimore and Hartford with the economic powerhouses of New York, Washington and Boston. Next March 2, he reports, a "Northeast Summit" will be held in Philadelphia aimed at a putting together a state/local government and business coalition to push for Northeastwide intercity rail, a smart growth accord and a carbon-reduction compact.

Radically improved growth approaches are critical in all the 10 U.S. megaregions, says Yaro. He argues "we made such a hash of settlement patterns" around interstates, and inflicted such serious harm on cities through sprawling 20th-century growth patterns, that a reverse course of focusing quality, compact development into bypassed city cores and struggling suburbs will make the most sense to accommodate the coming millions of new people.

"Smart" highways, high-speed and improved commuter rail, America 2050 argues, will speed workers, business travelers and goods between the megaregions' networked cities, stimulating idea exchange, expanding labor pools and providing fresh opportunities for workers of today's bypassed areas.

Each megaregion has special issues it needs to make a priority. The Texas Triangle (San Antonio-Houston-Dallas/Fort Worth), for example, needs to collaborate across hundreds of miles on water issues, including protection of such resources as the Edwards Aquifer.

The America 2050 group hopes to engage — at least after 2008 — federal support for sound megaregion development. The idea wouldn't be federal regulation, but rather clearly articulated national priorities aimed at achieving sounder growth, sustainability and economic competitiveness.

The election this fall of a strong group of governors willing to talk about the country's tough emerging challenges could be a strong first step.

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