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## EDITORIALS

### REACHING AHEAD

Sunday, March 19, 2006

The future belongs to those who reach for it. By that measure, look out for China, which is aggressively redefining itself and in the process scripting the future for the world.

China is massively ambitious. And it isn't simply government driven. The Chinese themselves are convinced of their nation's greatness and destiny.

One manifestation of that is China's ongoing massive investment in and expansion of its rail network, including construction over the next four years of 5,400 kilometers (3,348 miles) of high-speed rail lines linking major cities. Last week, China announced that it will build a second line powered by magnetic levitation between Shanghai and Hangzhou, a distance of 200 km (124 miles). The current rail travel time is about 2 1/2 hours; a maglev system will drop it to about 30 minutes.

One-way tickets will cost, according to local sources, 150 yuan (\$18.66). The cost of the line is estimated at 35 billion yuan (\$4.3 billion).

Shanghai has the world's only existing commercial maglev system, linking Pudong International Airport and an out-of-the-way section of the city at speeds of up to 266 miles per hour. Despite its location, the 12-mile ride, which takes eight minutes, has become a tourist attraction and a powerful symbol of China's desire to be on the cutting edge of technology.

The United States — and in particular, Pennsylvania — could have been where China is today in maglev development. A Pittsburgh consortium has been developing an American maglev system, using German technology, for more than a decade. But neither the federal government nor the state has been willing to bet on the project by investing the necessary dollars to get it up and running.

That's enough to make us wonder: How many maglev systems does China have to build before we get the message? Or will we end up buying Chinese

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maglev technology down the road?

Maglev is expensive, as new technologies invariably are. But its price will come down and its value will go up as it is introduced, further developed and mass produced -- as it surely will be.

And why will that happen? It will happen because maglev is energy efficient at a time when energy is becoming increasingly more costly, because it is powered by electricity (as opposed to cars and airplanes powered by ever-diminishing reserves of petroleum), and because it is fast, safe (it can't derail), environmentally friendly and an enjoyable ride.

No less important, maglev could be the mother of all economic-development programs. Gov. Ed Rendell proposes to spend \$1.2 billion on an economic stimulus program next year involving 1,344 different projects. That's good politics and continues what administrations from both parties have done over the years.

But the value of that investment gets lost in its scattershot approach. If Pennsylvania truly wants to carve out a new economic niche for the future, it needs to take the risk of heavily investing in a technology of the future that will set this state apart from every other and launch an entirely new industry, generating enormous spin-off benefits.

China did it, and it is moving away from the rest of us at maglev speed. But Pennsylvania still can catch up if it only it will make the wager, instead of playing it safe. Which, of course, isn't safe at all, because we'll be left to make the most of the economic scraps.

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