

Rendell says maglev train should be more than a dream

By Paul Nussbaum | March 06, 2014



Former Gov. Ed Rendell opens his pitch for a super-high-speed maglev train at a luncheon Tuesday at the Comcast building. (MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer)

Former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell on Tuesday hosted a pitch for a super-high-speed, magnetically levitated train that could whisk riders from Philadelphia to New York City in 25 minutes and to Washington in 30.

Rendell and other ex-politicians, public officials, and business executives have been hired to raise support for a Japanese-financed maglev train on the Northeast Corridor, operating between Washington and New York.

The Central Japan Railway Co. owns the maglev technology, and the Japanese government has offered to finance about half of the more than \$10 billion cost of an initial segment that could be operating between Washington and Baltimore within 10 years.

At a Center City gathering of political, corporate and civic leaders, the maglev backers outlined a vision of a \$100 billion line with 311-mile-per-hour trains traveling in tunnels and atop elevated pylons between Washington and New York in an hour, with a stop in Philadelphia.

Other "local" maglev trains would also stop in Baltimore, BWI Airport, Wilmington, Philadelphia International Airport, and Newark International Airport.

Detractors have dismissed the idea as too expensive and too experimental, especially in a political climate where even conventional high-speed trains can't get funding.

Rendell, who took a ride in November on a maglev test track in Japan, said Tuesday it's "time for America to do something big and something great."

"I got off that train and said, 'We've got to do this,' " he said.

Japan's maglev trains are propelled by electromagnetic forces acting between superconducting magnets on the vehicle and reaction coils on the walls of the U-shaped channel in which the train runs.

At speeds of more than 90 m.p.h., the train levitates and zips along, four inches above its guideway. At lower speeds, it runs on rubber wheels.

Central Japan Railway hopes to eventually build a \$100 billion maglev line between Tokyo and Osaka, but it only has constructed an 11.4-mile test track so far.

China, using German technology, operates a 19-mile-long maglev train line in Shanghai.

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The Northeast Maglev, the American company formed in 2010 to bring the Japanese technology to the United States, hosted Tuesday's lunch gathering on the 45th floor of the Comcast Center, with Comcast chief executive Brian Roberts offering his support in a brief telephone cameo from Los Angeles.

Those attending included Lt. Gov. Jim Cawley, City Council President Darrell L. Clarke, Deputy Mayor Rina Cutler, state legislators, and business, academic, and civic leaders.

Former Democratic U.S. Sen. Tom Daschle, now a Washington policy adviser to law firm DLA Piper, chairs the advisory board of the Northeast Maglev, and told the Philadelphia audience that "for a long time, we've heard people say it's impossible, but now it's been done. Now it's real."

Other advisory board members include Rendell, former Republican Govs. George S. Pataki of New York and Christie Whitman of New Jersey, former U.S. Transportation Secretaries Mary Peters and Rodney Slater, Kevin Plank, founder of Baltimore-based sportswear manufacturer Under Armour Inc., and former Northwest Airlines chief executive Douglas Steenland.

The company says a maglev line will require substantial federal funding as well as private investment.

The chief executive of The Northeast Maglev is Wayne L. Rogers, former Democratic state chairman of Maryland.

Rogers said he did not consider the maglev proposal in competition with Amtrak, which has its own long-range vision to bring conventional high-speed trains to the Northeast Corridor.

Andy Kunz, president of the U.S. High Speed Rail Association, dismissed maglev as an expensive distraction from conventional high-speed trains.

"It's a way to pretend we're doing something," Kunz said.

"It's as much as five times more expensive per mile," he said. "I'm all for forward thinking and new ideas, but I'm also for building what's off the shelf so we can enjoy the benefits today."

In a statement Tuesday, Amtrak said it was "prepared to operate maglev trains as part of a coordinated intercity passenger rail system at that point in the future that might see the vision of maglev supporters realized."

But Amtrak, which struggles annually to get congressional financial support for existing rail service, said "any major improvement to intercity passenger rail transportation, such as maglev, faces major funding and logistical obstacles that only a new paradigm in support for public transportation can address."

BY THE NUMBERS

\$100B -Projected cost to build route from New York to D.C.

311 - Speed in miles per hour of maglev train.

25 - Minutes to get from Phila. to New York. Time from Phila. to D.C. would be 30 minutes.
