

Canadian high-speed rail project 'would help keep us level with U.S.'

CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MAY 20, 2009

A multibillion-dollar Canadian high-speed rail project could inject new life into the domestic steel industry and allow the country to keep pace with a "visionary" plan launched last month by U.S. President Barack Obama, railway industry and public transit advocates said yesterday.

"Obviously, President Obama has made it a priority and so we're certainly at risk of losing ground to them if we don't take a good hard look ourselves and make some decisions over the next few years," Cliff Mackay, president and chief executive officer of the Railway Association of Canada, said.

The Obama administration announced a multibillion-dollar plan in April that identified 10 possible regions to build new high-speed rail systems as part of its economic recovery plan. They include potential links to Canadian cities such as Vancouver and Montreal from Seattle and Boston, as well as links to U.S. cities such as Detroit and Buffalo in the Great Lakes region.

Mackay was among the first witnesses to appear at parliamentary hearings that began last week on the future of high-speed rail in Canada.

"Clearly, what we need is vision beyond the next six months and that's what's missing in Canada," said Paul Langan, the founder of the advocacy group High Speed Rail Canada. "This vision has never been seen before in North America ... These people [in the U.S.] are behind rail."

MPs have described the hearings as a fact-finding mission to sort out the dreams of high-speed rail from the reality of Canada's geographical and political climate. The transport committee at the House of Commons is focusing its study on the feasibility of a faster train service or high-speed rail in the Quebec City-Windsor and Calgary-Edmonton corridors.

"There is certainly great interest within our committee to determine, one, if it's viable, [and] two, if we can do it, and what the stakes and what the costs would be," said committee chairman Merv Tweed, a Conservative MP from Manitoba.

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