

## Kunz urges US to build high-speed network

Andy Kunz, president of the US High Speed Rail Association, explains to David Briginshaw why he wants US politicians to stop playing around with ideas for modest speed increases and be bold by building a fully-fledged 27,000km high-speed rail network over the next 20 years.

ANDY Kunz has a very clear idea of the way forward in the current US debate about high-speed rail, and he certainly doesn't favour improving line speeds to 177km/h (110 miles/h) in the name of high-speed rail. "I want to end the debate about 110 miles/h as I don't believe in upgrading the network," he says. "I don't think we have the time and we would end up with something like Amtrak's Acela Express for the whole country, which would be a disaster."

Instead, Kunz wants the US to go straight to new construction. He wants to build a national network of around 27,000km in four phases over the next 20 years. "I know this is very aggressive, but at around 1300km a year this is less than in China and Spain," he says.

The first phase would comprise what Kunz describes as "low-hanging fruit." That is lines serving the busiest corridors, namely: the planned Californian network, a line in the Pacific Northwest, a network of lines radiating from Chicago, part of the Texas triangle, the first phase of a Florida network, a line centred on Atlanta, and New York - Washington DC. Further phases would gradually plug the gaps until a national network is completed in 2030.

"I know President Obama says high-speed rail is only viable to link cities less than 800km apart, but I say this is not the case anymore as flying is less viable than it used to be, so we need to rethink the situation," says Kunz. He says people often end up taking circuitous routes as flying direct is often not possible due to the lack of suitable flights or price. Airlines are pulling out of smaller airports, forcing people to drive further. To make matters worse, flying is becoming a lottery in the US as flights are often cancelled due to airlines cutting back on maintenance to save money.

Kunz has done some very rough calculations about what it might cost to build the network. He bases his calculation on the California high-speed project, although he recognises that California's construction costs are likely to be higher than for many other locations due to the need to tunnel through mountains and provide protection against earthquakes. Nevertheless, Kunz has come up with a ballpark figure of \$US 600 billion.

"This works out at \$US 30 billion a year, but to put it in context, we spend more than that each year on widening and constructing highways," says Kunz. "We want government to switch spending from road to rail - about 90% of our transport money is spent on roads and air."

Kunz says he is trying to revive the idea of thinking big in the United States. "When we do decide to do something, we do it on a huge scale, such as the construction of the inter-state highway network in the 1950s and 1960s." Kunz also says America needs to stop studying whether or not to build high-speed lines and swing into action. "I sometimes think conducting studies is a way for nothing to happen. Let's stop wasting time and money on endless studies and just start building a high-speed network."

Kunz says there are some signs that the federal government is starting to think this way, as the current transportation secretary has said the US needs to reduce the number of vehicle miles travelled by road. "This is the first time a

transportation secretary has said we need to plan for less driving," Kunz observes. "The fuel price shock last summer woke everyone up, and the price of oil is now back up to \$US 70 per barrel, so people see this as a permanent situation."

Furthermore, the United States consumes about 20 million barrels of oil a day, which is nearly a quarter of global consumption, and 70% of oil in the US is used for transport. "We have a much bigger need to address than other countries," Kunz points out.

He says there is increasing political support for high-speed rail. He estimates he has full support from about 25% of congress and partial support from a further 50%. "More importantly, a lot of people on the congressional committees support high-speed rail," he explains.

The US High Speed Rail Association is staging a conference in Washington DC this month to further the cause of high-speed rail in North America. "After the conference, we want to write a set of common standards for high-speed rail and get the Federal Railroad Administration to adopt them so that everyone builds to the same standard and we don't end up with a lot of incompatible systems.

The US certainly has a highly-competent champion for high-speed rail as Kunz is very knowledgeable about his subject, both in terms of what is being achieved around the world, and why the US needs to invest in this technology. The fundamental question is: can he win enough backers over to his way of thinking and combat the strong vested interests which want to stick with road and air transport?