



PASSENGER RAIL OKLAHOMA

**PASSENGER RAIL OKLAHOMA
ANALYSIS
TULSA - OKLAHOMA CITY
RAIL CORRIDOR
OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION (ODOT)
2010 PLANNING APPLICATIONS**

January 14, 2011

Executive Summary. On October 28, 2010, ODOT received *Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) High Speed Intercity Passenger Rail program (HSIPR)* planning grant commitments. (The HSIPR program provides matching *planning* and *capital* dollars to states seeking passenger rail service expansion. See figure 1 for a HSIPR map and figure 2 for an Amtrak map for comparison). ODOT will use matching funds to complete a *Service Development Plan (SDP)* and a *National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)* study for a 106 mile, *Tulsa – Oklahoma City High Speed Rail (HSR)* route.^[1, pages 4-6] A seventy-five percent federal match, \$2.2 million, combined with a \$384,000 state rail plan development match,^[2] provide funding to complete minimum requirements for an FRA HSIPR program *capital* application. A fourth, \$14 million, multi-state (Texas – Oklahoma) HSIPR study is also underway to analyze *South Central High Speed Rail Corridor* development.^[3]

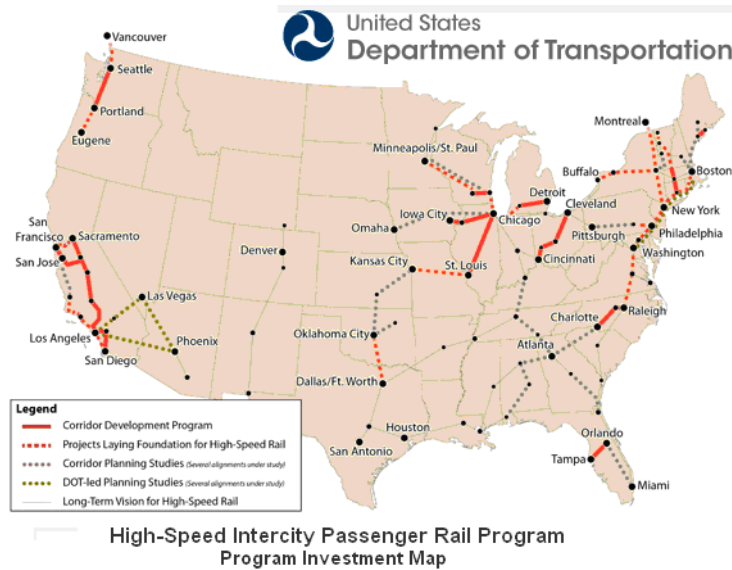


Figure 1: FY-2010 HSIPR Program Map (Source Federal Railroad Administration)^[4]



Figure 2: Amtrak System Map (Source Amtrak)

Complete HSIPR grant *studies* do not ensure *capital* grant approval. Capital decisions will be made in subsequent FRA HSIPR rounds. Two rounds are complete, with \$10.5 billion in federal awards granted since 2009. Oklahoma continues to face stiff competition from more populous states, such as California, Illinois, and Florida.

Intense competition was evident in 2009 when ODOT's *Tulsa – Oklahoma City* HSIPR capital application was not even forwarded for FRA/HSIPR technical evaluation.^[5] The 2009 national HSIPR program was funded at \$8 billion, and an overly ambitious ODOT requested \$2 billion of the total. According to ODOT's subsequent 2010 planning application, further communications have occurred with the FRA.^[6] However, ODOT's 2010 project study scope is not dramatically different from its 2009 HSIPR request; i.e. another \$2 billion ODOT planning application is expected in 2014. With expected federal budget tightening, capital funding for any application approximating ODOT's 2009 request is unlikely to warrant serious FRA consideration for many years, if ever.

In conclusion, ODOT's application does not inspire optimism when considering the prospect of a successful 2014 HSIPR capital grant. Moreover, the project's timeline is lengthy; *36 months*.^[7] This narrowly focused approach does not address emerging state or regional transportation needs and challenges. Energy shortages, possible federal environmental penalties, mobility, and regional/global competition demand a more realistic approach with more expeditious timelines.

Most importantly, Oklahoma loses economic benefit each year it ignores expanding state passenger rail services. The *Texas Transportation Institute* (TTI) observed \$18 million in economic activity as reported in its study *Measuring the Benefits of Intercity Passenger Rail, A Study of the Heartland Flyer Corridor*.^{*} Now is the time to expand, not to study the passenger rail into oblivion.

Alternative Recommendation: An alternative to ODOT's grandiose HSR plan exists. Oklahoma owns rail infrastructure between Oklahoma City and Sapulpa. This infrastructure should be used to jump start passenger rail operations between the state's two largest metropolitan areas, thus bolstering the economy. This action will also provide the FRA with further evidence of Oklahoma's commitment to passenger rail expansion. This will better position the state to qualify for larger FRA/HSIPR capital grants, while still providing essential transportation to Oklahoma travelers and visitors in the near term.

Again, ODOT's stated goal is to develop Express HSR between Oklahoma City and Tulsa without intermediate stops in Chandler, Stroud, Bristow, or Sapulpa. Following Express HSR implementation, the conventional 79 mph route could remain as a local service while enhancing freight rail operations between Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Encouraging freight movement along the conventional route would in turn preserve Turner Turnpike infrastructure with fewer heavy trucks.

Finally, it has been more than a decade since ODOT and Amtrak initiated *Heartland Flyer* operation between Oklahoma City and Fort Worth. The *Heartland Flyer* in its present form remains a successful, yet lazy state transportation asset that only serves five central and southern Oklahoma communities. As a successful pilot project, it is past time for expansion. A public-private-partnership (P3) should be deployed to extend benefits to both potential expansion cities and existing *Heartland Flyer* communities in accordance with the approved FRA/HSIPR Oklahoma Rail Plan application.**

* *Measuring the Benefits of Intercity Passenger Rail, A Study of the Heartland Flyer Corridor*

Texas Transportation Institute for TxDOT and ODOT
<http://tris.trb.org/view.aspx?id=924489>

** **NOTE:** Page 6 of ODOT's *Oklahoma State Rail Plan* application mentions the possibility of seeking funding/contributions from "non-Federal and non-State sources through user fees, matching funds, or other private capital involvement." This is in accordance with National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) recommendations.

NCSL Website:
<http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=20321>

Approved ODOT State Rail Plan Application
http://www.odot.org/recovery/hs_rail/pdfs/2010rail-grant_app.pdf

1.0 ODOT/HSIPR Study Scope Specifics. The approved ODOT planning grant provides important details of the project study scope that highlight the extents of ODOT’s unlikely proposition.^[1] Seventy-five miles of new right-of-way will be considered for purchase, along with upgrades to 31 miles of existing rail infrastructure^[8] (see figure 3). The study will propose 150 mph and greater operation between the Oklahoma City Santa Fe depot and Tulsa Union Depot.^[1, page 4] Equipment studied will be non-electric and electric. The latter provides the capability of greater-than 150 mph operation. Planning is scheduled to complete in December of 2013.^[7] This would position ODOT for a 2014 HSIPR grant application. ODOT has already received a federal capital match to construct a \$100 million I-244 multi-modal bridge across the Arkansas River (see figure 4).^[9]

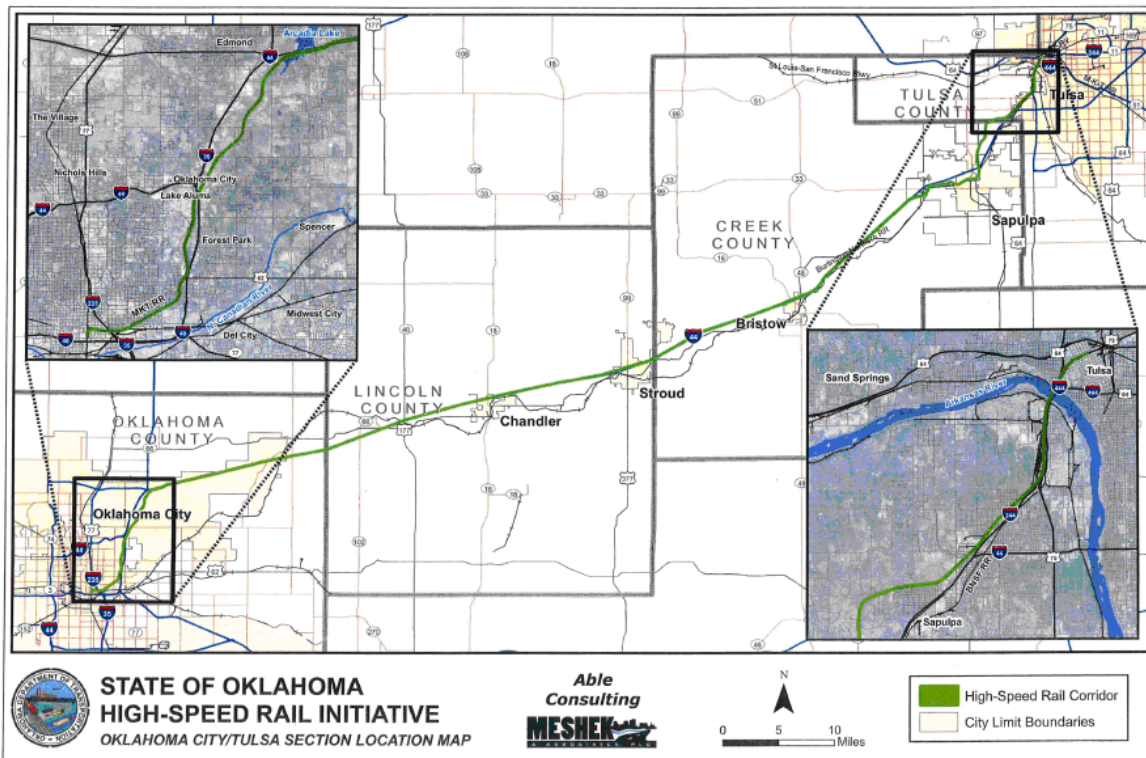


Figure 3: ODOT Tulsa – Oklahoma City HSIPR Map (Source ODOT)^[8]



Figure 4: I-244 Tulsa American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Bridge^[9]

2.0 Public Outreach^[1, page 6] and Project Management.^[1, page 9] Public input and planning updates will be available from two sources as listed below. Public meetings are required to satisfy NEPA requirements. ODOT has developed a project management team to ensure timely and complete delivery of project objectives.

2.1 Public Outreach. ODOT included the following statement within its *'Description of Work'*

“It is ODOT’s intention to undertake extensive public outreach and involvement efforts during the course of the project, including public meetings and hearings, briefings, involvement of key stakeholders, and use of social and internet-based communications tools. This Task will detail the elements of the public involvement and outreach program.”^[1, page 6, 'Description of Work']

Oklahoma legislators should take note of this intent. Constituents should be contacted and encouraged to attend these important meetings. Oklahoma legislators should also attend, prepared to question ODOT regarding policy and progress.

2.2 Project Management. A *Tulsa-Oklahoma City High Speed Rail Corridor Program* management team has been established. Mr. Johnson Bridgewater and a Deputy Project Manager (DPM) will oversee the SDP and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) managers. Mr. Bridgewater will serve as the FRA and 'other stakeholder' point of contact. Project consultants will report to the SDP and EIS managers by method of bi-weekly teleconferences and monthly project reports.^[1, page 9]

3.0 Public Benefit and Projections.^[1, pages 10-13, 'Potential Public Benefits'] ODOT repeated the public benefits and service projections from its 2009 application in its 2010 HSIPR application. Economic revenue generation is expected to reach \$3 billion based upon the service. Initial annual trips resulting from six daily frequencies (six northeast and six southwest operations) are expected to be 496,700. Park-and-ride locations may be considered as intermediate stops such as currently located east of I-35 near Edmond. Stroud is being considered for a maintenance facility. 185,000 new jobs are expected to be created in the Tulsa-Oklahoma City corridor alone. New direct and indirect construction related employment is projected to reach 4,173.

4.0 Long Term Benefits.^[1, page 11] Long term benefits have been estimated. The number of annual trips is expected to increase to 688,000 after ten years and to 1,139,000 after twenty. Twenty year projections also show a \$31.3 million benefit through hydrocarbon, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and nitrous oxide reductions (This equates to 55,000 tons). Fuel savings will reach 1.8 million gallons over the 20 year span.

5.0 Conclusions. It is highly important that the Governor, the Oklahoma legislature, and public provide close watch over Oklahoma's HSIPR program applications. While ODOT's stated study goals are exciting to consider, their realization borders on fantasy due to the requirement for an initial federal investment and the improbability of that materializing. Federal capital funding is extremely limited, and will be even less plentiful in the short term due to expected federal fiscal restraint over the next decade. Consider that during the first two HSIPR rounds, the FRA awarded capital funding to existing infrastructure improvement projects as well as new HSR alignments. HSR projects, using new alignments, were exclusively limited to connecting cities in the upper echelon of Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA).^[10] A more reasonable approach is to look at the probability of qualifying for a smaller initial 'local' project in hopes that a 'grand express HSR' project can be funded at a time when federal resources are more plentiful.

6.0 Recommendations. ODOT should move forward with its *Tulsa – Oklahoma City High Speed Rail Initiative*. It should not, however, consider federal funding the only avenue to passenger rail expansion between the communities. The state of Oklahoma owns rail infrastructure between Oklahoma City – Chandler – Stroud – Bristow – Sapulpa which connects with a short run between Sapulpa and Downtown Tulsa. This was the subject of the 2001 Carter Burgess engineering study commissioned by ODOT.^[11, page 12, Table 2] Figure 5^[12] provides a focused look at the route. This study

found that passenger rail operations between the two communities could begin at a comparatively small initial cost of \$26 million (versus \$2 billion). Oklahoma should continue working with Kansas to connect with the northern half of Amtrak's national system through Wichita to Kansas City.

7.0 Final Points. ODOT has since criticized using the existing/conventional state owned route. It considers the route too curvaceous (aka slow) to compete with the Turner Turnpike. However, note that average *Heartland Flyer* speed is also slow in comparison to I-35 speed, yet ODOT considers the *Heartland Flyer* an overwhelming success.

Travelers have rated the *Heartland Flyer* number-one in Amtrak customer satisfaction surveys.^[13] This shows that speed is not the prevailing factor in the eyes of *Heartland Flyer* patrons. Rather, Amtrak serves a niche market between Oklahoma City and Fort Worth where cell phones, laptops, and other cyber-productive devices can be used in lieu of holding a steering wheel with attention focused only on the road. The passenger train also provides transportation for a growing number of seniors and those who cannot or should not drive due to health/medical conditions or due to the lack of reliable personal transportation. The benefits also extend to life and limb savings while also preserving some personal transportation investment through fewer highway miles traveled.

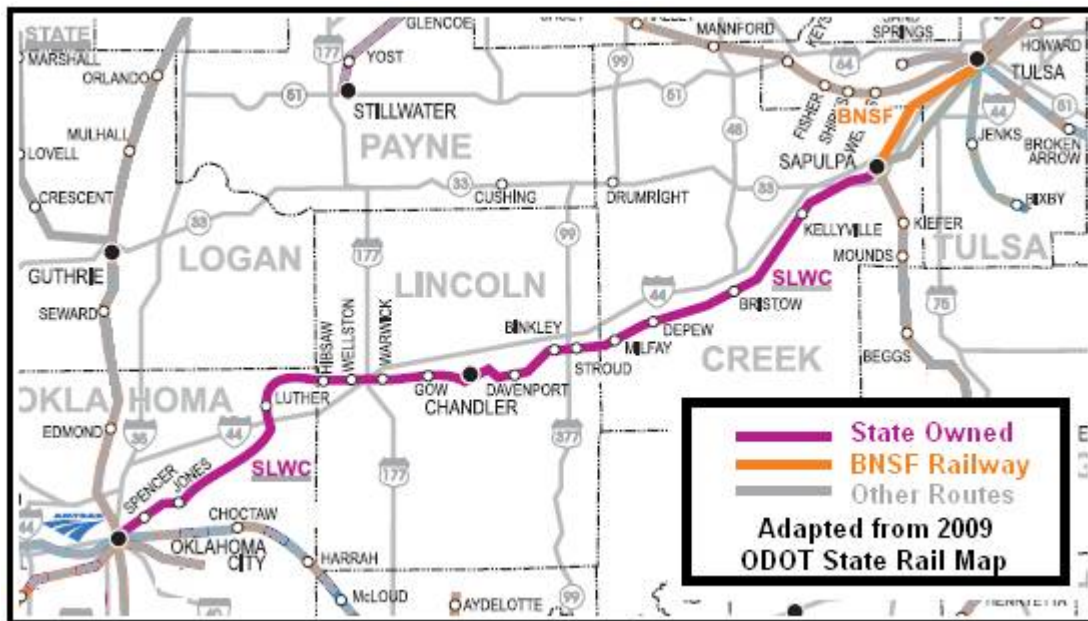


Figure 5: Existing Rail Infrastructure Between Tulsa and Oklahoma City^[12]

REFERENCES:

[1] *Final HSIPR Grant Application*, Oklahoma Department of Transportation, http://www.odot.org/recovery/hs_rail/pdfs/2010final-grant_app.pdf

[2] *High Speed Intercity Passenger Rail FY-2010 Planning Funds* home-page, Oklahoma Department of Transportation, *2010 State Rail Plan Grant Application* http://www.odot.org/recovery/hs_rail/2010planning-funds.htm

[3] Page 1, *Oklahoma City to South Texas Corridor Feasibility Study, Service Development Plan and Service NEPA*, Texas Department of Transportation, http://www.odot.org/recovery/hs_rail/pdfs/2010application-multi-state.pdf

[4] *High Speed Intercity Passenger Rail Program* home-page,
Federal Railroad Administration/USDOT
<http://www.fra.dot.gov/rpd/passenger/2243.shtml>

NOTE: A *Summary of Federal Investments* is provided, Federal Railroad Administration
http://www.fra.dot.gov/rpd/downloads/HSIPR_Summary_of_Investments.pdf

[5] Page 20, *High Speed Intercity Passenger Rail Program Summary of Applications*, Federal Railroad Administration
<http://www.fra.dot.gov/rpd/Downloads/hsiprapplist.pdf>

[6] *State of Oklahoma High-Speed Rail Initiative*, home-page
Oklahoma Department of Transportation,
http://www.odot.org/recovery/hs_rail/pdfs/2010final-grant_app.pdf

QUOTE: “*After discussions with FRA staff and review of FRA’s new HSIPR program, ODOT now seeks funding assistance to complete a Passenger Rail Corridor Investment Plan for the Tulsa-Oklahoma City corridor.*”

[7] Page 6, Project Schedule, *Final HSIPR Grant Application*,
Oklahoma Department of Transportation,
http://www.odot.org/recovery/hs_rail/pdfs/2010final-grant_app.pdf

QUOTE: “*ODOT intends to complete the SDP and EIS from scoping through Record of Decision within 36 months, beginning January 2011 and ending December 2013.*”

[8] *State of Oklahoma High Speed Rail Initiative Oklahoma City/Tulsa Section Location Map*,
Oklahoma Department of Transportation
http://www.odot.org/recovery/hs_rail/maps/TUL-OKC_Corridor.pdf

[9] Conceptual Drawing/ I-244 Multimodal* Bridge
Garver Engineering/ODOT
<http://blog.garverusa.com/2010/03/garver-awarded-multimodal-bridge.html>
Tulsa World, *ODOT Awards I-244 Contract*,
http://www.tulsaworld.com/business/article.aspx?subjectid=54&articleid=20100301_54_0_TheOk371829

* Multimodal refers to multi-transportation use. In the case of this drawing, rail, pedestrian, and vehicular traffic will be accommodated. This ARRA project was approved for \$49.48 million.

[10] *HSIPR Program Summary Lists*,
Federal Railroad Administration, USDOT
http://www.fra.dot.gov/rpd/downloads/Summary_of_FY10_Selected_Projects_1010.pdf
<http://www.fra.dot.gov/rpd/Downloads/hsiprapplist.pdf>

[11] *Oklahoma High Speed Passenger Rail Feasibility Study*,
Carter Burgess Engineering for the Oklahoma Department of Transportation
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[12] *Oklahoma Railroad Map 2009 (adapted)*,
Oklahoma Department of Transportation
<http://www.okladot.state.ok.us/hqdiv/p-r-div/maps/railroad/index.htm>

[13] *Amtrak Ridership Flying High: Soaring Sales for the Heartland Flyer*, Press Release, August 18, 2008,
http://www.amtrak.com/servlet/ContentServer?c=AM_Content_C&pagename=am%2FLayout&cid=1241267389534