

Mica Switches to Working With Amtrak on High-Speed Rail Service

By Nathan Hurst, CQ Staff

In dropping his insistence that Amtrak surrender its profitable Northeast Corridor routes, House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman John L. Mica is aiming to advance a broader objective of bringing high-speed passenger rail sooner to the route linking Boston to Washington.

Mica, a Florida Republican, told a high-speed rail advocacy organization in New York this week that he would no longer press for legislation to put Amtrak's popular Northeast Corridor routes out for bid in the hope of attracting private investment.

But the chairman signaled a new direction after the U.S. High Speed Rail Association event in New York, when he joined house Democrats Carolyn B. Maloney and Jerrold Nadler in recommending that unspent federal high-speed rail funds should be redirected to the Northeast Corridor.

“He is willing to sit down with Amtrak and anyone else interested in bringing true high-speed rail to the Northeast Corridor to talk about how it can be achieved,” a spokesman for Mica said. The spokesman said the Amtrak privatization proposal “has precipitated a lot of input, which he’s always encouraged.”

Mica has been a long-time critic of Amtrak, which he has referred to as an inefficient, Soviet style bureaucracy. But Amtrak enjoys strong political support from lawmakers in the region and critics questioned if private companies would be willing to invest in providing passenger rail service without heavy government subsidies.

While he continues to back the idea of encouraging private investment in efforts to introduce trains in the corridor that can travel faster than 200 miles an hour, Mica has conceded that Amtrak will be the vehicle for that investment. Aides said Maloney and Nadler would welcome any additional

investment in high-speed rail projects connecting New York to the rest of the Northeast.

Amtrak projects that it will take 30 years to upgrade its Northeast Corridor speeds, which now top out at 150 miles an hour on Acela trains, to 220 miles an hour. Mica wants to cut the time for introducing the faster trains by half.

One source that Mica may be eying is the high-speed rail funding that the Obama administration doled out through the 2009 stimulus (PL 111-5). Newly elected Republican governors in Wisconsin, Ohio and Florida rejected funds for projects in their states last year. The administration has redirected some of those funds elsewhere — including to a California high-speed project.

But Mica has rejected President Obama's vision of a nationwide network of high-speed passenger rail service as impractical, arguing that resources should be concentrated in the Northeast.

Mica intends to begin investigating the long-term viability and financing plans of other potential high-speed rail projects in the U.S., including the California proposal that is drawing new criticism for its increasing cost estimates and time line.

The California High Speed Rail Authority announced last week its business plan for building out a north-south corridor, focusing on the heavily-traveled route between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

The project is expected to cost \$98.5 billion — about twice the original estimate — and be completed in 2033, 13 years later than planned. The authority is banking on receiving about \$55 billion in federal funds for the project.