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POSTED: FEB. 18, 2010

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Jump on board the trains: Federal millions are passing Michigan by

BY TIM FISCHER

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Last month, President Barack Obama announced \$8 billion in competitive grants for high-speed rail in the U.S. California got \$2 billion. Florida and Illinois each got more than \$1 billion. Michigan settled for \$40 million to upgrade three train stations.

But Michigan's leaders shouldn't play the victim.

These high-speed rail grants were competitive. The states that pulled in more rail funds were the ones that made investments of their own in sustaining and expanding existing passenger rail systems.

It was no secret that the awards would be analyzed using this criteria. Except, perhaps, in Michigan.

Check the record: Voters in California – where economic woes and legislative dysfunction may surpass even our own – approved a \$10-billion ballot initiative to support high-speed rail. Last summer, the Illinois Legislature approved \$400 million to expand the state's rail system. Florida spent more than \$500 million acquiring land to build a high-speed rail line, and the legislature endorsed the state's rail plan in a special session.

Wisconsin really ate Michigan's lunch. Last year, the state spent \$47.5 million to purchase new trains from Spanish train manufacturer Talgo -- which then agreed to open two new manufacturing facilities in Wisconsin. When the \$8 billion in federal money was announced, Wisconsin got \$822 million.

It's not that Michigan didn't try. The director of our state Transportation Department created an office dedicated to seizing such opportunities. They quickly pulled together about \$1 billion in various requests.

But while Wisconsin's governor was negotiating with Talgo, our governor was proposing a 25% cut in the state's passenger rail funding. While the Illinois Senate was approving that \$400 million to expand passenger rail, our senators were looking to cut rail funding in half. While the Florida Legislature was endorsing its state's rail plan, we didn't have one. We still don't.

It's as if we struck out without swinging. Michigan showed a desire for federal money, but not the commitment to support the projects it would fund.

Passenger rail is a catalyst for economic development that invariably accompanies it. Businesses near rail stations profit. Companies whose employees take transit benefit. And travelers lured to the "Pure Michigan" experience spend money with our friends and neighbors.

The state Transportation Department recently concluded that rail routes cost the state about \$7 million per year and return about \$62 million. Ridership is at historic highs.

The \$40 million Michigan secured for train stations is valuable. But we missed good opportunities to maximize our economic stimulus.

Further dawdling will not help. U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood warned during a Detroit visit last fall that a regional transit authority for southeast Michigan will be a prerequisite for federal money. Legislation creating that authority is drafted. Let's pass it.

The governor and the Legislature shouldn't play the victim anymore. That's not going to make Michigan more competitive for the next round of federal funding.

Let's fully fund our current passenger rail system and get moving on regional cooperation.

A version of this story appears on page 17A of the Thursday, Feb. 18, 2010, print edition of the Detroit Free Press.

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Let's demonstrate that we have a vision for our transportation future.

Let's get in the game and swing for the fences.

Tim Fischer is deputy policy director with the Michigan Environmental Council.

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