

Trains, faster trains and automobiles

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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My wife and I recently moved to a Chicago neighborhood that is farther from public transit than we're used to. She's looking into [clinical pastoral education](#) placements, most requiring travel across town at odd hours. My parents live in a small town 80 miles from us, my aging grandparents in another town 30 miles farther. It's become clear that it's time for us proud urbanites to buy a car.

Eco-crunchy types though we may be, we're not too troubled by the idea—the planet's future, after all, relies far less on obsessing over individual carbon footprints than on public policy that effects *widespread* change. (It's true that we're considering buying an old diesel car [and tricking it out to run on used french-fry oil](#), but mostly because it would save on gas money.) So I'm excited about the Obama administration's [new grants for high-speed rail](#), an area in which the U.S. lags far behind most developed nations. No high-tech prototype auto—to say nothing of [airplanes](#)—comes close energy-efficiency-wise to the 19th-century innovation of passenger trains.

This initiative might affect my life more than most people's: [one of the planned development areas](#) covers the bulk of my geographical history and the homes of most of my loved ones. Of course, that won't matter if having a car and access to a sophisticated highway system makes it too tempting for my wife and I to avoid the train—the way most Americans have, by choice or necessity, for decades.

Funding highways over rail [was](#) and [continues to be](#) a policy decision that drives the behavior of many. (The freight railroad companies' [hostility to Amtrak](#) doesn't help, either.) Maybe Obama's rail plans will be a baby step back.