

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Thinking in big terms again

Berlin wants to once again become a hub of transportation for Eurasia in the 21st century.

This author recalls the days (this was when the Americans were preparing for the Moon landing) when he would read those color-pictured reports on what the world would look like in the 1980s, 1990s, and the 21st century: Man would be on the Moon and on his way to Mars and other planets; on Earth, there would be supersonic, rocket-like giant airplanes and entire cities on the bottom of the ocean; and at the end of the century, superfast magnetically levitated trains running inside vacuum-chamber tubes would transport people from one city, country, and continent to another.

Such visions died out in the 1970s, when the ecologist movement was gaining influence, and debates about big high-technology projects of the future were termed "politically incorrect." The "small is beautiful" outlook became even more pervasive in the 1980s and into the early 1990s.

However, the scene changed toward more positive perspectives in late 1994, especially in Berlin.

The government's decision to give the long-overdue go-ahead for a maglev rail project between the two biggest German cities, Berlin and Hamburg, in the autumn of 1994, did a lot to help "uncork the bottle" for big ideas about new technologies. In Berlin, the discussion about grand infrastructure and technology projects for the 21st century advanced considerably in late 1994.

For example, in mid-November, Herwig Haase, Berlin's city-state minister of public transportation, talked about future maglev rail lines stretching from Berlin to Beijing. In

Schwerin on Nov. 17, at a ceremony with the engineering firm MPS, which is to complete the construction of the first maglev train link between Hamburg and Berlin by no later than the year 2004, Haase said that once the okay for an extension of the Hamburg to Berlin maglev line toward the east is given, it would be possible to transport passengers to Warsaw and Moscow and on to Beijing. Haase said that such a maglev line would take passengers "from Berlin to Beijing in about 24 hours," at speeds of 400-500 kilometers per hour.

Haase also endorsed an extension of the maglev line from Berlin toward the southeastern regions of Europe, through Dresden and on to Budapest and Prague. He said that with the completion of the Berlin-to-Hamburg section (in 2004-05), Berlin would become the "hub of the most modern railway system on the continent and in the entire world."

At a hearing in the House of Representatives of Berlin on Nov. 24, Haase reiterated the proposal, setting a new standard for what a political debate in a technologically advanced state like Germany should look like. He declared that the "pioneering spirit in the transportation sector always has pushed Germany forward. This kind of pioneering spirit is required at the end of this century.

"With the Transrapid, Germany is ahead in the field of transportation systems. Other countries that are also working on such a system are lagging behind the level of development that we have achieved. The Berlin Senate will not miss this one-time chance of giving the starting signal for the trans-

portation system of the 21st century," he declared.

"I want to emphasize explicitly on this occasion," Haase said, "that the Transrapid must not be confined for long to the Hamburg-to-Berlin line. . . . I am expecting a European net here—yes, a net—that one day, like the railway, will reach out beyond Europe.

"Most of all, I'm convinced that the Transrapid will have a chance concerning eastern Europe, for example, along the continental route leading toward Warsaw, Minsk, and Moscow, where it could demonstrate the [shorter] traveling time. And in order to take up that hint [another member of parliament shouted, "Beijing!"], I am also convinced that it is only a question of time until this system will have replaced the old system, and that is why I addressed a place that is a bit farther away."

This unprecedented debate was, however, not covered in any media outside of that city—illustrating once again the anti-technology ideology which dominates the media. But this is likely to change soon.

Take, for example, the year-end issue of Germany's business weekly, *Wirtschaftswoche*. Looking into the future, it wrote that by no later than Christmas 2020, most big cities in western Europe will be connected by maglev trains running inside underground vacuum-chamber tubes at speeds of 800-950 kilometers per hour, and travelling from Hamburg to Bucharest in only three hours.

By Christmas 2020, the weekly wrote, construction of such maglev tube connections would be under way from the already-completed central European grid to the west (Portugal); the southeast (Istanbul); the north (Helsinki); the east (Warsaw, Minsk, St. Petersburg, and Moscow)—all lines being built on the basis of a crash program approach.