

Germans Rediscover The Maglev Train

by Rainer Apel

A seminar of the Hamburg Chamber of Industry and Commerce on July 10, discussed the project of a “Eurorapid” linking Germany with the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria, and Hungary. The discussion tended more towards the technical-pragmatic than the broader conceptual side. The currently abolished but originally planned Hamburg-Berlin route would be at the center, with branches going to Denmark and Sweden; to the big cities in the Netherlands; to Warsaw and Krakow, and from there to Kiev; and to Dresden, Prague, Vienna, and Budapest.

At the seminar, Dutch spokesmen advertised an impending governmental decision, by the end of this year, for two projects in the Netherlands: 1) the Randstad project, linking the five biggest cities; 2) a route from Amsterdam to Groningen, with the option of extension into Germany towards Hamburg. In response, the government of the northern German state of Lower Saxony announced that it would campaign for the link from Groningen to Hamburg across the state’s territory, via Oldenburg and Bremen, once the Dutch decided for the maglev project. This was reiterated in another Lower Saxony statement on July 11.

On that date as well, the government of the western German state of North Rhine-Westphalia announced a joint venture together with Deutsche Bundesbahn (DB) railway, to build a 77 kilometer “Metrorapid” project, which would link five big cities in that state; today, the government of the southern state of Bavaria issued a similar announcement, on the formation of such a joint venture with Deutsche Bundesbahn, for a 30 kilometer line connecting Munich with the that city’s international airport. Either of the two projects, or both together, would receive federal government co-funding in the range of 4.5 billion deutschemarks, once construction began.

And in Schwerin, Gov. Harald Ringstorff of Mecklenburg-Prepomerania, in Germany’s northeast, departed from the ruling coalition platform between his Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Democratic Socialist Party (PDS, the former East German communists), which expresses no interest in the maglev train. Ringstorff said he is for the “Eurorapid” as presented in Hamburg, because it gives a new meaning to the old Hamburg-Berlin project. Most of that line would run across his state’s territory. Ringstorff’s statement went only half-way, however, insisting that the project should be built by private sector investors alone, since the state had no extra money for the Transrapid.

Chinese Deal Is the Incentive

The signing of a contract, in January, with China on the Shanghai-Pudong maglev line given impetus to discussion within Germany on maglev trains. To be precise, this is an incentive born out of utmost frustration that it is not only impossible, for phony ecological and budgetary reasons, to build a maglev line inside Germany, but that it *is* possible to build it outside of Germany.

Returning from a recent visit to China, former Hamburg Mayor Henning Voscherau reported an anecdote about his meeting Beijing with his old friend, former Shanghai Mayor and present Prime Minister Zhu Rongji. His Chinese host asked him if it were possible to revitalize the first commercial German maglev project from Hamburg to Berlin, which had been nixed by the German government in February 2000. Voscherau told him that he personally was all for it, but the government and Germany’s politicians did not want it. Zhu Rongji then told Voscherau jokingly that Germany (which developed the maglev technology, but has never built a real project to date) might one day still have its first maglev train — even if it were only on license from China.

This new incentive for maglev, however, has only been afoot outside of Germany’s present SPD-Green coalition government, which has shown no commitment to promote maglev technology at home, since the signing of the Shanghai-Pudong contract.

It was in the eastern state of Thuringia that the federal government crushed the last attempt at real political momentum for a grand maglev project. In January 1991, Gov. Josef Duchac of Thuringia, proposed a pilot grand infrastructure project to mobilize eastern Germany’s industry. He called for a maglev train connection from Berlin to Frankfurt am Main, via Leipzig and Erfurt (Thuringia’s state capital). Duchac, a leading Christian Democrat, met strong opposition with the national government of Christian Democratic Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who at that time was collecting DM 18 billion for the “German share” in the Bush-Thatcher Gulf War on Iraq.

Duchac attacked the government’s budget-balancing attitude, adding that it was a scandal that it was apparently easier to collect billions for that meaningless war, than to assign 5 billion deutschemarks for a meaningful infrastructure project in eastern Germany.

But ten years later, the maglev train has again found a number of prominent endorsers in the political establishment. For example, during the July 5 session of the Bundestag (parliament) on the 1994 maglev law, Hans-Michael Goldmann, a Free Democratic legislator from northwestern Germany, said that for the maglev train, “the best application is, basically, the Hamburg-Berlin route, continued to Scandinavia from Berlin on towards Warsaw, and from Hamburg on towards Groningen and Amsterdam.” Goldmann called for the construction of a grand maglev transport artery from the western border of the Netherlands to Poland, via Hamburg and Berlin.