Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Maglev train may run in the year 2000

The German cabinet is expected to decide soon on a 300-mph train to run from Hamburg to Berlin.

At a Bonn press conference Jan. 9, the two German cabinet ministers of research, technology, and transportation, Heinz Riesenhuber and Günter Krause, and the interim head of the two German state railways, Heinz Dürr, endorsed the construction of a first stretch of the 310-mile-per-hour maglev train, Transrapid. The first such train, they declared, should run between Hamburg and Berlin—Germany's two largest cities (1.8 and 3.5 million inhabitants).

The results of tests of the train system quoted at the press conference were positive, so the project can be launched with the government's new National Transportation Plan (delayed from its original November 1991 date, but definitely due by this summer) and finished within the next eight years. So the first magnetically levitated train may run in Germany by 2000.

Krause and Riesenhuber have backed the new train project all along. What is new in Bonn is that some staunch Transrapid adversaries in the parliament have suddenly changed their views. One of these, Klaus Daubertshäuser, spokesman of the opposition Social Democrats, went out of his way to welcome "finally, a clear political decision for that high-tech option."

Sources in Bonn and in industry trace the amazing shift in favor of the Transrapid to the latest reports from Tokyo that the Japanese are working overtime on their own maglev train system (a somewhat different technology, still using wheels). Thus, the "comfortable" two- or three-year margin which the Germans thought they had over Japan, could be gone by next year.

"If we don't build the Transrapid, the Japanese will do it," said Labor Minister Norbert Blüm in an interview published in *Die Welt* on Jan. 13. "If that happened, Germany would sacrifice a best-selling export product, because no country in the world would buy a German Transrapid that is not accepted in Germany."

Blüm called for a maglev track linking Bonn with Berlin, to be built along the existing waterway and canal grid between the Rhine-Ruhr region and Berlin, thus conserving land.

Blüm's favored project competes with several other proposals being taken out of the drawers these days. Thuringian state governor Josef Duchac revived his February 1991 call for a maglev project to link the densely populated Rhine-Main region with Berlin, passing through four of the five east German states. Duchac, who met with railway boss Dürr in the Thuringian capital of Erfurt Jan. 15, went to the press afterward and represented his earlier proposal for a Transrapid track from Berlin via Leipzig and Erfurt to Frankfurt.

The Duchac proposal has various advantages: The 560-kilometer Berlin-Frankfurt track is almost twice as long as Hamburg-Berlin one, hence it will have twice the impact on the job market. Unemployment is a serious problem in east Germany, where half of the industrial sector has collapsed since 1990.

Projects in Germany's eastern states will benefit from a special government program (Upswing East II) that gives a preferential status, in terms of low-interest credit lines and contracts, to eastern firms. The program may soon become a model for west German industries which are suffering big losses in shrinking export markets abroad.

If the German government does favor eastern producers for eastern projects, the ailing electronics sectors of Thuringia and Saxony, concentrated in the two states under the old east German regime, will benefit greatly from a Transrapid project that requires a lot of electronics. The same effect would work on the shipyards of the Baltic coastline state of Mecklenburg-Prepomerania. Key parts of the experimental Transrapid track on which the system has been tested since 1984 in the western Emsland region, were built by the nearby Papenburg Shipyard. But they could be built now by workers of the east German shipyards at Warnemünde, Rostock, and Wismar.

In a recent engineering study, the Berlin Institute of Railway Technology forecast that the employment effect of maglev projects would be huge: The 290-kilometer Hamburg-Berlin track would employ 150,000 workers, 31,000 of these just for the steel and concrete parts of the project. A second, 180-kilometer track from Berlin to the Saxonian state capital of Dresden, would employ another 100,000. The second maglev track would have a specific advantage: From Dresden, the Transrapid could run on to the capitals of Czechoslovakia (Prague), Hungary (Budapest), and Austria (Vienna).

As a second-best option, the same "East European integration" effect is included in the Duchac plan: From Leipzig, a 120-kilometer link to Dresden could be made. From there, Southeast Europe could be reached on the Transrapid almost as fast as by airplane.