Germany sets 18-year transportation plan

by Rainer Apel

With the release by the German government, after a long delay, of the new federal transport plan, mandating investment of nearly DM 500 billion ($330 billion) by the year 2010, the coast is finally clear for a real program of infrastructure building to begin. For the first time in 30 years, the state's expenditure for rail construction will be higher than that for highways. The DM 108 billion for new railroads, compared to DM 99 billion allocated for highways, is still too little to be called a change in priorities; but the project that the Bonn government has adopted will be able, by the year 2010, to shift 10% of the expected volume of transports from road to rail, as the volume of rail transport itself doubles. Railroads will again play an important role in the transport of people and goods.

The prerequisite for this, since transport needs are continuing to expand, is that the project be implemented in such a way—including the construction of state and interstate highways—that traffic jams will not become a permanent phenomenon in the coming years. For rail as well as highway transport, a great deal will depend on whether the central East-West axis between the Ruhr region and eastern Germany's industrial regions is ready by the end of this century, as has been mandated by law. Only when these lines are built from Dortmund to Dresden via Kassel, Erfurt, and Leipzig—both for ICE high-speed rail transport and four- to six-lane highways—will it be possible to talk about a breakthrough in transport policy. Without such a central transportation axis, the eastern German production of Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia, and Saxony, plus that of the neighboring eastern European industrial regions, will not be accessible. The previously existing transport axes simply do not allow the transport of the large quantities of goods that such a construction plan requires.

The most important rail lines are the Hanover-Berlin, Leipzig-Dresden, and Hanau-Erfurt lines, and the whole network of tracks for the ICE high-speed rail operation will have to be expanded to a length of 1,300-3,200 kilometers by the year 2010.

Unfortunately, while the new federal transport plan includes the revolutionary magnetically levitated (mag-lev) Transrapid "bullet train" and the track to link Hamburg and Berlin, Germany's two biggest cities, in the list of projects to be developed, these projects are to be privately financed. Five projects for highway construction which would build new links in the Saarland between Germany and France, are also supposed to be carried out privately.

Happily, a private industry-banking group, including Thyssen, Siemens, AEG, and Deutsche Bank, announced on July 21 that it will build Germany's first mag-lev train, provided the license is given this fall, when the transportation plan is expected to be approved by parliament.

The promotion of domestic shipping lags behind the original plans. It is good that the relinking and modernization of waterways between western Germany and Berlin is given priority, but the development of the Elbe and Oder rivers for heavy-duty transport is to be delayed until ecological measures are taken on both rivers.

In total, the new federal transport plan mandates investments in new construction projects of DM 222 billion, DM 192 billion for maintenance, and another DM 79 billion for improvement of local and regional transport structures. The effect of the plan on the labor market, according to experts, is that it will create about 2 million jobs over the next 18 years.