

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Too fast for slow German bureaucrats?

The Transrapid maglev rail technology is still faced with funding and other problems.

Will there ever be a functioning maglev train, and, more important, will it ever run in Germany? This is one of the biggest mysteries in present-day Germany, and it has been an unanswered question for more than 25 years. The technology for such a "bullet train," that can run at speeds of 450-500 kilometers per hour, has been there, basically since the late 1960s. But, except for an experimental track of about 30 km in northwest Germany, the concept of the "train of the future," the Transrapid, has not materialized. It had been discussed in the 1970s and 1980s, and it is still being discussed, but still not built, today.

There is a government plan, from 1994, for a maglev project which would connect Germany's two biggest cities, Hamburg and Berlin, with a 280 km track. But, the government is dominated by budget-cutters, politicians who believe in the golden calf of the "balanced budget." Thus, they gave the nominal go-ahead for the project only on condition that it be built in a "mixed, state-private approach," which means that the state is funding the construction of the track, while all the rest will be funded by private-sector firms that build and operate the maglev trains on that route, from 2005 on. This funding structure is to make sure, the budget-cutters argue, that the state's role is kept small.

The problem with this structure was threefold: 1) it was almost certain that the budget-cutters in the government would try to repeat what they have done with other big, state-funded projects, i.e., slow down implementation of the plan, in order to keep fund-

ing obligations on a low level; 2) the private-sector firms, most of which in Germany are run by downsizers and budget-cutters as well, would also try to slow down the project, with the idea that they would be able to extract more money from the government to reduce their own private "risks"; and 3) the funding structure required a change in the law, because public transport has always been a responsibility of the German state.

The change in the law caused a delay in the project of two years, because the legislation did not pass over all the parliamentary hurdles before the summer of 1996. In the meantime, the budget-cutters "discovered" new budget holes every other week, so they also began questioning whether the maglev would ever pay off, whether the cost of construction could be kept under control, and they found other such pretexts to call for more "feasibility" studies.

This provided welcome pretexts for the budget-cutters in industry, who also "discovered" that the delay in the project led to inflation-fed price increases in the construction and electronics sectors, driving final costs "out of control." The industry even threatened to sell the maglev know-how abroad, rather than spend a single mark more for the "costly" vision of maglev.

In January, Transport Minister Matthias Wissmann threatened the industry and the bureaucrats that the government would withdraw from the project, if they continued to cause problems. Wissmann also took on the banks, accusing them of disinterest in the project, which should instead be a

top priority for the bankers, because of the revolutionary prospects that the new technology provides for the world transport sector and, therefore, also for the prospects for German exports. Wissmann's attack on the banks occurred behind closed doors, however, so that a crucial enemy of the maglev technology was not exposed before the eyes of the public. The role of the banks is crucial: They have put pressure on the government to maintain a "balanced budget" and to keep spending low, in order to ensure that debt service is paid, instead.

Fortunately, some Germans do not want to remain passive spectators of this unprincipled game. On Jan. 22, the "Youth for the Transrapid" announced its formation at a press conference in the city of Schwerin. The initiative, organized by the youth organizations of three political parties, Christian Democrats (CDU), Social Democrats (SPD), and Free Democrats (FDP), kicked off a national campaign to collect petition signatures in favor of the maglev project, to hold events explaining the project to the youth, and to engage in other activities, all to put pressure on the decision-makers, so that the project would be secured.

"Youth, especially, will benefit from the Transrapid," Andreas Lange, of the CDU youth, declared, adding that it is "an entirely new technology that creates jobs and opens up new dimensions in high-speed transport." Daniel Bahr, of the FDP youth, explained that the Hamburg-to-Berlin maglev project is crucial, because it will build the first section of what would later become a maglev grid across Europe: from Berlin to Prague, and from Hamburg to Amsterdam. This is the appropriate approach to a technology potential that will lead Germany into the 21st century. So far, the politicians, managers, and bankers have not done their job.