

RAIL Magazine's Priorities for Building Connections Between Air and Rail

When community leaders and passenger rail planners are considering a new rail line or service, one of their foremost considerations is does it serve its region's airport(s). Beyond a generator of thousands of trips for the rail system, airports are important assets to the regional economy and larger transportation network. These trends reflect the growing recognition to offer improved connections between air and rail travel options. The following are our recommendations for fostering a cohesive passenger transportation network utilizing not only air and rail services, but the larger milieu of mobility options.

- 1 The connection between air and rail services must primarily benefit passengers. Transportation around the world is increasingly evolving into one system. In order to leverage new intermodal facilities, air-rail partnerships and improved baggage options, **travelers should be presented with travel information in the most concise and cohesive manner as possible.** Internet-based transportation programs – which are increasingly accessible by mobile devices – should allow passengers to input the precise address of their origin along with the exact location of their destination and be routed according to their preference for time, cost or convenience, or all, if possible. Those options should be the same whether the passenger is traveling down the block or around the world. Everything from bike lanes to international flights to high-speed trains should be considered as a possible option. Improved access to – and coordination of – information only provides better customer service and makes potential travelers become actual passengers. Even better would be the option of purchasing a single ticket or form of payment that would be accepted by a community shuttle driver, a railroad conductor and an airport gate agent. Better still would be an electronic version of that ticket that could be accessed through a mobile device.
- 2 For much of the last half century, airports were seen as venues only intended to host people traveling by air, and as a result, were designed as isolated and self-contained facilities, acting independently of the regions and communities they served. However, **as air traffic at airports across the nation and around the world becomes increasingly congested, these facilities must be re-envisioned as regional transportation nexuses, offering convenient and coordinated links with passenger rail and community and public transit options.** Accordingly, sources of public investment at all levels of government must demonstrate a willingness to update policies and procedures that stifle improved intermodal connections and offer avenues of investment to facilitate such changes.
- 3 Similarly, as linkages between different modes of travel are expanded at airports, **there must be a new recognition of the relationship between transportation service providers as partners, not competitors.** The viewpoint of an epic battle between air, rail and road travel is simply no longer accurate, and leaders of both public and private organizations, corporations and entities offering transportation need to recognize this changing dynamic. To their credit, some have. Continental Airlines and Amtrak currently offer joint ticketing arrangements, where a rail trip on the Northeast Corridor acts as the first leg of a trip across the continent or overseas, much like the partnerships established by many airlines and rail providers in Europe and Asia. Aside from offering travelers less costly and more coordinated options, such arrangements allow each partner to focus on the business for which they are best suited – for airlines, that means moving people long distances at great speeds; for passenger rail, it means connecting communities and regions in short-to-medium distance corridors.
- 4 As airport intermodal facilities improve and new partnerships between air and rail operators are established, the way people utilize these enhanced connections must be reconsidered as well. **Among the most frequently-raised ideas among both airport officials and passenger rail leaders is the ability for improved baggage-handling options between the air and rail modes.** For instance, a passenger in downtown Chicago should be able to check their bag at the train station, take a quick rail trip to either O'Hare or Midway airport, fly to some distant destination, hop aboard a corresponding train to the city center of Paris or San Francisco, and not worry about their luggage until they arrive at the final train station. Such integration encourages travelers to utilize these options, and technology and procedures to make such integration possible are already in place in airports such as Amsterdam and Zurich. They should be prioritized elsewhere.
- 5 Many observers choose to focus on the differences between transportation modes, arguing one way or the other about the relative attributes or disadvantages of each. But there is one aspect in which all modes of transportation are strikingly and seriously similar: security. There is no hiding the fact that transportation vehicles, facilities and infrastructure are the highest priority targets for those who wish to do harm to others. This is true the world over. **The governmental agencies tasked with coordinating the security of transportation assets should be mindful of this interrelationship between travel modes, and share best practices, technologies and innovations that improve safety and security for all,** regardless if their trip includes a plane, train, bus or boat. As these segments of the global transportation network become increasingly connected, a weakness in one undermines the stability of the entire system, and must be understood as such. 