

Leveraging Air-Rail Connections to the Benefit of the Transportation System and its Passengers

By Stephen Van Beek, Ph.D

Over the last two years, the most significant change in U.S. transportation policy has been the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) and its \$8 billion investment in passenger rail. This includes funding support for dedicated high-speed rail corridors, such as those in California and Florida, and existing rail corridors where passenger and freight rail share track infrastructure. Since ARRA's passage, the Congress passed another \$2.5 billion in intercity passenger rail support for Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 and the Obama Administration has included \$1.0 billion in its FY 2011 budget proposal – with many congressional advocates likely to press for even higher funding levels.

One of the critical issues for rail – as it is with transit systems and airports – is the quality of the intermodal connections between rail and the other modes. Few highway drivers, for example, are likely to leave their automobiles in favor of high-speed rail, if on the destination side of their journey they do not have access to transit alternatives when they arrive. Many European cities, such as Paris and Amsterdam, have rail systems with high market shares for intercity and metropolitan travel precisely because their rail networks connect with other national and private rail systems, transit, and airports. By taking advantage of the aggregation of travelers, seamless connections operate to the benefit of each of the modes within their transportation networks.

Unfortunately in the United States, our transportation policy has often neglected or outright discouraged passenger intermodalism. This has been especially true with air-rail connections. The benefits of linking rail systems and airports are often lost by those who are either focused on their own mode or project in isolation, or more ominously by



those who see rail and aviation as modal competitors. This old-style modal parochialism has flared up over issues such as which mode is better for short-haul travel – i.e., between 100 and 600 miles – and which has a smaller carbon footprint. The truth is that there is not one answer that applies for every situation.

Where they exist, air-rail connections serve three distinct roles in a transportation system:

- **Metropolitan/Airport**

Access: These connections provide passengers the ability to move to and from the airport without having to drive a vehicle. Solutions can include transit buses, commuter rail and high-speed rail. For each of these alternatives, connections serve the interests of each provider by generating larger markets. For airports, such as Ontario International Airport – in

Southern California – that lie along a planned high-speed rail corridor, an air-rail connection offers the prospect of a geographically wider and more populous service area. This, in turn, will encourage the development of more air service for the community and, for Ontario, will supplement capacity available at Los Angeles International Airport.

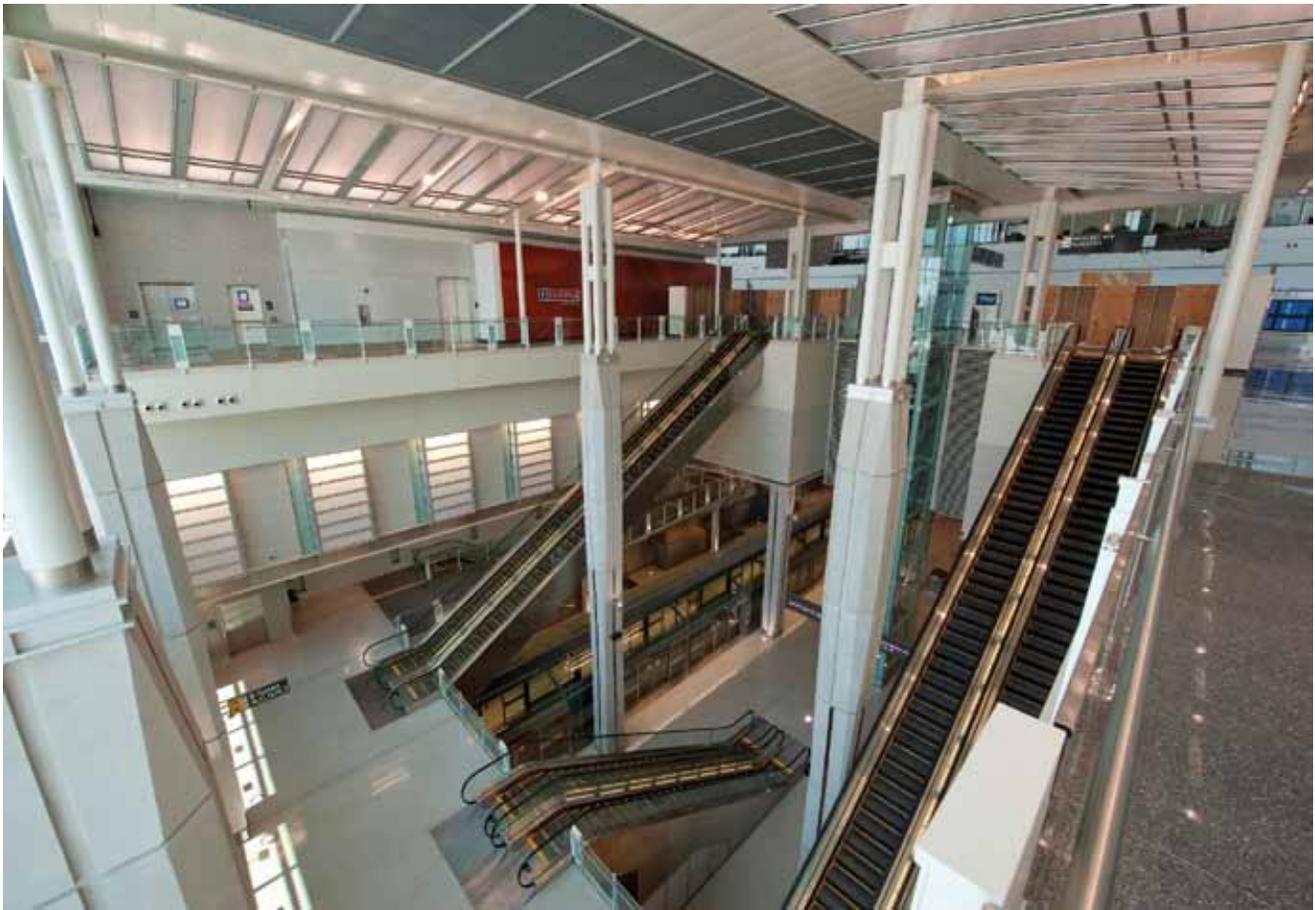
- **Intercity/Origin and Destination Traffic:**

Depending on its speed, passenger rail can offer an attractive modal alternative to highways and air travel especially along population-rich metropolitan corridors. In particular, for areas that face a shortage of future airport capacity, high-speed rail offers the prospect for off-loading significant amounts of short-haul air travel.

- **Intercity/Connecting Air**

Passengers: High-speed rail if integrated within the airport can serve, in effect, as a connecting flight. In some busy air corridors, on-airport stations, together with single ticketing by airlines and rail providers, can significantly expand air and rail service. The photo below of Amsterdam's Schiphol's airport signage directing arriving passengers





to the nation's integrated rail network, just one level down in the airport terminal.

U.S. Policy

The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) has *interface* of rail and airports in its plans to upgrade the nation's rail system. To this point, however, USDOT has not been explicit about how the quality of air-rail connections is factoring into its decision-making. In order to better leverage the networks to the benefit of the overall system and its passengers, USDOT and Congress need to fix current U.S. laws and regulations which actively discourage the airport access and connecting air-rail solutions identified above.

Today, federal policy mistakenly treats airports solely as aviation infrastructure, not as the intermodal transportation centers they are. It

does so for a defensible reason; namely that under a long-standing principle of *user pays* airline passengers or shippers should not pay for surface transportation links that they do not actually use. Given that major airports operate on a cost-recovery model compared to transit systems, which do not, this would create a temptation to subsidize transit with costs paid by airport users.

Accordingly, under Federal Airline Administration (FAA) rules, airports generally must use their revenues – whether from Airport Improvement Program grants, passenger facility charges, and even non-aeronautical revenues – such as parking and concession revenue – for infrastructure located on the airport, or defined as within the airport boundary or along a right-of-way. Unfortunately, these requirements do not recognize that the airport portions of a landside connection

are often part of a greater surface transportation network, and some portion of off-airport surface transportation costs, such as maintenance, are attributable to the fact that the airport is one node in a greater network.

In addition, under federal policy, even if the infrastructure is on the airport, it is ineligible for revenues if it does not exclusively serve airport traffic. These restrictions apply to each of the airport's major sources of revenue. The FAA has interpreted these restrictions to mean that only incidental use by non-airport users is permissible and that use of it by more than a percentage of non-airport users would normally raise concerns about a project's eligibility.

How does this work in practice? Under the FAA's principle, infrastructure located on the airport would be ineligible if commuters, starting at their home station and used it on their way to downtown –

i.e., for a non-airport purpose. This is, in fact, the model of the transit service I use for my daily Blue Line commute on the Washington Metro; I originate at Franconia-Springfield and pass through the Reagan National Airport (DCA) station on my way to McPherson Square. On these days, of course, I do not stop at the airport to catch a flight. But most days when I do, none of the infrastructure I use, which is also used by non-airport patrons, is eligible to be paid for by the airport.

The DCA example is instructive because at approximately 15 percent it has the highest market share for an airport access rail or subway project in the U.S. It is successful because of the easy connection between the subway station and the airport, just a walk over a footbridge from the station to the airline check-in desks, and because the Metro is part of a networked system with over 80 rail stations, all located within reasonable ride times of the airport. It makes no sense that federal rules would actively discourage other airports from adopting the DCA model. The irony is that it is precisely a networked access solution

that is most likely to be successful in generating significant transit and air ridership.

Finding Solutions: Today and Tomorrow

Notwithstanding these restrictions, communities such as Portland, Ore. have come up with ingenious solutions to work within the restrictive federal requirements. Portland International Airport and TriMet, the local transit provider, teamed with Bechtel Infrastructure Corporation to acquire additional property for the airport, which they then leased back to Bechtel, in an effort to expand the portions of the Airport MAX project that could be paid for by airport sources of revenue.

A modest improvement to the federal policy was included in the House FAA reauthorization bill (H.R. 915) passed by the House last year. Section 114 would expand passenger facility charge revenue eligibility to allow up to five airports to fund eligible portions of an intermodal ground access project according to the ratio of airport users to total

users. Thus, if 10 percent of the passengers using the station are airport users, 10 percent of the projected eligible costs of it could be financed by the airport (whereas today none of it would be eligible). This logic, if applied across the board to all airport sources of revenue, would be helpful in designing and funding not only better airport-transit connections, but connections between airports and new high-speed rail systems.

H.R. 915 should be only the start in reviewing and reforming laws and statutes that illogically obstruct better air-rail solutions. If policymakers remember that the ultimate purpose of transportation policy and projects are to improve services to passengers, and that improved connections serve the interests of what often are complimentary rail and aviation networks, then they will make the necessary much-needed changes. 

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