

# RAIL Magazine's Priorities for Regional Rail Systems

Although regional rail projects are – as a common mode – the most recent additions to the passenger rail milieu, the time is now to make essential commitments and decisions that will support the development of similar systems in the years ahead. The following are a number of key priorities that could make such a lasting effort possible.

**1** Any contemporary list of priorities for passenger rail includes the need to provide additional investment, but it's worth repeating here in the case of the emerging mode of regional rail. Investment streams have been established over the last several decades for heavy rail metros, light rail, streetcars, commuter rail, intercity rail and, now high-speed rail – through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Now with a handful of regional rail systems in operation or close to completion, **it is time for leaders in Congress and the Administration to recognize this momentum by authorizing a source of investment for these innovative and efficient projects.** The upcoming legislation to authorize our nation's surface mobility network is the perfect opportunity. Regional rail makes the benefits of modern passenger rail available to not only urban and dense metropolitan areas, but those in more rural and suburban communities that previously could not access viable passenger rail systems. Moreover, the mode's quintessential intermodal connections with other rail and transit services suggest benefits that extend beyond local jurisdictions into regional and, yes, national realms.

**2** By virtue of their inherent innovative nature, emerging passenger rail modes – such as regional rail and streetcars – have trouble fitting within established governmental boundaries when it comes to issues investment, regulations and procurement, especially at the federal level. New or developing regional rail systems – such as those profiled in this issue – fall within the purviews of both the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). Rather than effectively doubling the paperwork and bureaucratic entanglements, **the FTA and FRA should instead work together to ensure that efficient and responsive regional rail projects are not stymied by governmental inertia.**

**3** In all the regional rail projects highlighted in these pages, connections are made at terminal stations to other modes of transit which expand the reach of the service to a much larger region. In some cases, these are high-capacity bus routes – like those served by Ottawa's O-Train. In many others, regional rail trains link with intercity, metro, light rail or commuter rail lines, while the planned SMART system in northern California will connect to ferry boat service to San Francisco.

However, **in order to more fully realize these intermodal locations as community assets, they must be allowed to foster economic development opportunities as well.** The large numbers of people coming and going at these nexuses are magnets for retail, commercial and residential growth. Local zoning and planning policies must be updated to allow these opportunities to flourish, and all levels of government should offer capital investment to construct distinctive station facilities and other crucial infrastructure befitting of a regional destination. Additionally, airports must be increasingly considered as prime venues to host these facilities to broaden the reach of mobility options.

**4** Even more than light rail, streetcars and heavy rail metros, regional rail depends on the availability of abandoned or under-utilized rail lines. However, when a freight operator indicates a plan to abandon a stretch of right-of-way, there is often a rush to immediately convert that route into a community trail or – much, much worse – a roadway. Once a rail corridor is carved-up by other entities or private property owners, it is nearly impossible to re-assemble it again. **Local, regional and state governmental bodies must work with freight railroads in their capacity as landowners to ensure soon-to-be-abandoned rail lines or property can be devoted to passenger lines, if viable.** And lest we be perceived as opposed to the notion of a strong network of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, remember that with appropriate planning and resources, rail corridors and public trails are not mutually exclusive, but in fact complementary. These facilities can serve rail passengers and trail users alike, with amenities such as lighting, access points at stations – with bike lockers, benches and other services – and the added security of rail vehicles travelling at regular intervals and protected by transit police.

**5** One of regional rail's distinguishing features are the vehicles that make up its service fleets. They all utilize some form of diesel multiple unit (DMU) technology – meaning non-electrified, self-propelled vehicles – that operate over standard railroad tracks that also host freight trains. However, only TriMet's WES system actually operates during the same time periods as freight traffic due to the more rigid structures of their DMUs manufactured by the now defunct Colorado Railcar. As regional rail services become more common, **vehicle manufacturers and transit agencies must work together to develop regional rail vehicles that are applicable in a greater variety of situations.** Coupled with that must be a willingness from the FRA to understand and apply safety standards and rulings in a timely and reasonable manner to ensure regional rail trains are carrying passengers as quickly and safely as possible. 