

RAIL Magazine's Priorities for Encouraging New Approaches in Passenger Rail

1 All Rail is Local

It is tempting to view the many forms of passenger rail as a perfectly unified network, with train routes and systems acting in concert in the spirit of consistency and efficiency. Experts and observers might try to point overseas, where large-scale rail operations seem to function harmoniously with each other – and in many ways they do. But the broader truth is such symmetry is rare anywhere, and especially unlikely in the United States, which has a multi-tiered governance and political structure like none other. Japan – the world's first experimenter with high-speed rail – split up its high-speed rail network between four distinct operating companies, often producing competitive friction between the business units. In Europe, varying operating agencies – SNCF, Deutsche Bahn, Renfe – battle for access to the continent's prized high-speed infrastructure, and how and where new routes are developed is contentious. Looking at our own past, American railroading was arguably the most ruthlessly competitive industry in all of human history, with fierce rivals like the New York Central and Pennsylvania undermining each other at every turn.

Within this historical and global context, the national scope of the intercity and high-speed network envisioned by the Obama Administration may fall victim to its own ambition. While certainly a long-needed and noble effort to galvanize interest for a true resurgence of passenger rail in America, the effort is better suited by focusing on local and regional corridors to achieve the President's vision in a more incremental manner, where the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Our look at state and regional support for rail corridors demonstrates a lasting hunger for new passenger rail service in a solid handful of states, while others have little interest. Meanwhile, the America Moving Forward concept – built on the foundation of Los Angeles' Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's 30/10 transit investment plan – prioritizes the value of dedicated local support in attracting federal investment. Elsewhere, local leadership makes profound improvements for passenger rail in rural communities, historic facilities and new technologies.

2 Investing in Rail Where It's Wanted

While it is inarguable that tangible funding is necessary to make any passenger rail project a reality, it cannot be the sole component. Instead, it is more commonly the final ingredient once a more important conversation has already occurred in a community or region – the yeast that cultivates the ingredients into the final product. An intellectual process is a priority for any community considering passenger rail – a discussion of why a given project is necessary and the people's desire for it to be achieved. Passenger rail projects do not only require fiscal capital but perhaps even greater sums of political capital. Of course, strong leadership from an elected official, business leaders or community representatives can all find great importance when a project is facing a lack of consensus, but such political will can only be summoned after a process of engagement and reflection. As a result, the process by which investment – particularly at the federal level – is distributed should be cognizant of this founda-

tional relationship between community support and success, and direct the limited resources available to the communities truly interested in utilizing them.

3 Valuing Existing Assets

When a foundation for passenger rail has been established, incorporating additional elements is less daunting. Besides the inherent value of existing infrastructure and facilities – elements like stations, rights-of-way and vehicles – more lasting components of an integrated rail network have already been cultivated, most notably a ridership base. These communities and regions already have an expectation of success from their operational rail service rather than a fear of failure. They are familiar with the planning, design and construction processes, and draw upon examples for how their neighborhoods, commercial districts and downtowns function with the presence of an active rail service. That's why many areas can't wait to build their next rail line once they've implemented their first one – see Denver, Dallas, San Diego and Minneapolis for examples. Meanwhile, others have never transitioned beyond the planning phase – Kansas City, Cincinnati, Tampa – and have no underlying experience to justify the risk these projects require. The profound challenge here – like the fostering of community support and political will – is how do new communities overcome these significant organizational and attitudinal entrenchments that passenger rail confronts?

4 Look Outside

Throughout this edition of *RAIL*, we highlight perspectives from leaders and experts whose background is far from the traditional rail field. In our first Rail Yard submission, BASF's Frank Bozich explains his company's focus on connecting with local transit options to attract new employees. In the second, employees at United Streetcar explain how the work of their larger company – Oregon Iron Works – in building bridges and fabricated steel products ideally positioned them to manufacture the first American-built streetcar in more than a half-century. Likewise, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's background was largely in education and elected office before he began tackling passenger rail projects in his current post. These, and other examples, demonstrate the importance of welcoming and integrating thinking from outside the passenger rail industry in producing successful outcomes. One does not need an encyclopedic knowledge of passenger rail history or technical proficiency in the physics of an interlocking switch to realize the power of well-designed and developed rail systems. Leaders at all levels of government should seek out these innovative thinkers and incorporate their participation as rail projects are planned, funded and deployed.

5 What About Amtrak?

Few entities have survived as long as Amtrak with such a maddening lack of direction and support by those who oversee it. Although this is not the place for a history of the nation's intercity passenger rail provider, now – more than ever – seems to be an urgent time to reconsider its role. Despite these challenges, Amtrak just recently announced it will carry 30 million passengers for the first time in a single year (see All Aboard for more details), and the railroad's ridership has been steadily increas-

ing for several years. Conversely, U.S. Representative John Mica recently proposed a legislative vision to privatize much of Amtrak's operations, beginning with its core, the Northeast Corridor. We provide our own take on this concept on page 37. While far from perfect, Amtrak has proven it can increasingly attract new riders and serves as a bedrock for expanded state and regional rail services. The absence of Amtrak would yield only fundamental uncertainty for additional routes at a time when many communities are looking for new ways to connect regions and our air travel and

highway networks are strained with congestion. Sir Winston Churchill once said, "democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others." In many ways, Amtrak may be a less than desirable mechanism to deliver passenger rail service, but is likely the only one that can negotiate with our nation's collection of privately-controlled freight railroads on a lasting and meaningful basis. In that sense, it beats the alternative: nothing.



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