

Rail for Rural Areas: How Trains Can Help Meet Rural America's Mobility Needs



By Kevin Brubaker

Much of the discussion about high-speed rail in America centers on travel between cities, but it is also important to recognize the benefits of rail to the 82 million people living in rural America. New and improved passenger rail services will provide rural residents with access to cities in a way that no other form of transportation can.

For more than 30 years, the federal government has spent more than \$200 million per year to subsidize airports and air routes to rural America through the Essential Air Service, ensuring that

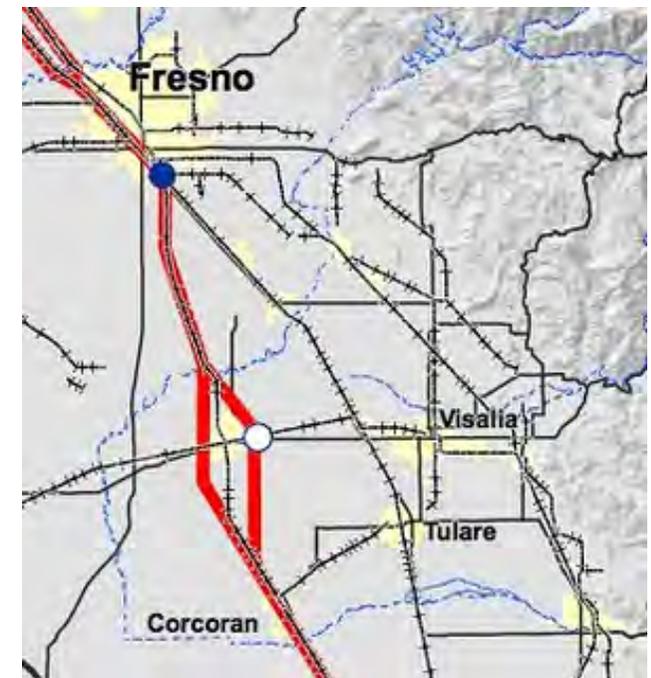
vital services are available to those in the most remote areas of our nation. This program is often in jeopardy, as lawmakers cast skeptical eyes on its cost-to-value proposition. Yet people in the remote areas, many forming the backbone of our nation's agriculture industry, aren't going to disappear. Nor are their transportation needs, particularly as funding for rural transportation programs like Essential Air Service dries up.

Unlike planes, trains can make stops along their routes. Stations in the small towns between cities provide easy access to the educational, economic and health care opportunities typically found in

urbanized areas. In many cases, these proposed stations will give half a million rural residents access to transportation without adding any operational cost to the system. No rural airport can make that claim. And while providing more transportation alternatives for rural dwellers is not the main reason to build new passenger rail lines, it is an added benefit that will allow these trains to serve even more Americans at no additional cost to the system.

Consider the proposed Hanford, California rail station, which figures as part of the Central California high-speed rail line. Hanford is a major trading center that serves the entire San Joaquin Valley. While its population is only 53,000, the station in Hanford would actually provide access to transportation for thousands of residents from surrounding towns, including Visalia, Tulare, Lem-

The California high-speed rail station planned for Hanford will serve a largely rural region in the state's San Joaquin Valley.





Click on the image above for a video of California's planned high-speed rail network, including its service to rural communities.

ore, Kingsburg and others. The introduction of the Central California line would also bring significant improvements to the freight lines that serve this agricultural cluster, thus improving the economics of farming in the area.

Realistically, the nation cannot build medical facilities and universities everywhere Americans live, nor can we create industries and jobs in every town. But we can make it quicker and easier for those outside cities to get to these necessities. Further, the introduction of passenger rail lines will improve the financial situations of many of these hamlets. For example, a train would make it far easier for Hanford residents to find work in Los Angeles or San Diego and would allow them to spend their earnings and pay their taxes at home.

Still, not all small town residents are going to cities to find jobs. In fact, some small towns host entire industries, but getting in and out of these towns is making their futures murky. Take for example, Warsaw, Indiana, a dot on the map to most

of us, but the center of the universe for orthopedic surgeons and their patients. A group of companies produces most of the world's replacement knees and hips in this town of 13,500, located in an industrial cluster 50 miles southeast of South Bend.

Every day, hundreds of industry employees from Warsaw travel the globe to see customers, collaborate with universities, visit satellite locations and meet with vendors. At the same time, medical personnel of every stripe come into Warsaw for training and product information.

Travel to and from Warsaw is inconvenient and expensive, which is why the future of the town will likely be determined by whether high-speed rail comes to Indiana. Driving from Warsaw to any of the major Midwestern airports – Chicago, Indianapolis, Detroit or Cleveland – means hours of lost time in the car and unpredictable traffic and weather.

A Parsons Brinckerhoff study shows that a high-speed rail connection to Chicago would save as

many as 1.1 million person-hours over 20 years, translate to \$90.7 million in benefit to Warsaw companies and boost the overall economic impact to more than \$130 million. Plus the state's tax picture would improve significantly with the introduction of rail, as property values in Warsaw are estimated to rise by more than \$35 million. And, of course, the orthopedic cluster's tax contributions rise in tandem with their profits.

In nearby Berrien County, Michigan, a study concluded it makes more sense to work for rail service that will connect it to Chicago's 2.5 million jobs than to focus on expanding the area's own base of 75,000 jobs (see <http://www.berriencounty.org/econdev/pdfs/CRS.pdf> – ed). In both situations, the potential economic impact doesn't support development of a new rail line, but a clear case is made for a stop on the line.

Not all the benefits of rail improvements are theoretical. Take Normal, Illinois as an example. While Normal is not known as the center of any particular industry, its two thriving universities, corporate headquarters including State Farm Insurance and Country Financial, plus Mitsubishi's only North American plant, make it the second busiest

Warsaw, Ind., has a strong railroading heritage, as demonstrated in this historic photo where several lines met at the city's depot.





A new multimodal transportation hub is already under construction in Normal, Ill.



train station in Illinois after Chicago's Union Station. In fact, more than 180,000 passengers pass through the tiny Normal station each year.

Normal shows us how a small town can reap huge economic benefits from the introduction of a modern passenger-rail line. As a result of the planned Chicago-St. Louis high-speed rail line, Normal is building a new Multimodal Transportation Center. Nearly \$100 million was invested in the construction of a brand new Four Diamond-rated Marriot Hotel and Conference Center, which boasts occupancy rates far above the industry standard. A Children's Discovery Museum has opened and the revitalization of parks, bike trails and the city center is well underway, attracting new busi-

nesses and workers.

Normal could become a blueprint for small towns around the country, because transportation is increasingly critical for America's rural population. Like Normal, Hanford and other smaller towns with rail stations can become the market towns of the 21st century. Rail service reinvigorates downtown areas, encouraging new retail development which serves the broader community.

Dwindling transportation options pose a serious threat to the economic vitality of rural America. According to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, as many as 3.5 million rural residents lost access to scheduled intercity transportation between 2005 and 2010, dropping the percent of rural residents with access to intercity air, bus, ferry, or rail transportation. And with the proposed cuts in the Essential Air Service, the impact could increase dramatically.

Pickup trucks and cars have always been a staple of small-town living and many are tempted to believe that this mode of transportation is sufficient for everyone's needs. Yet driving is becoming more difficult and, with gas prices hovering around \$4 a gallon, prohibitively expensive for some. Studies show rural residents are disproportionately negatively impacted by fuel price increases. Urban gridlock adds to the inconvenience as most major urban roadways are at or above capacity, making driving from towns to cities take significantly longer. In fact, every driver has already had their best ride into Chicago, Philadelphia or San Diego.

Urban access for rural residents is a critical and growing need. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, rural areas have higher rates of poverty, chronic disease and uninsured residents. But more pertinently, rural Americans lack a choice of providers to cover their health-care needs.

In 2005, there were only 55 primary care physi-

cians per 100,000 rural residents, and that number dropped to 36 per 100,000 residents in isolated areas. According to HHS, many rural Americans are affected by potentially preventable chronic diseases and their associated complications.

This statistic becomes even more daunting in light of the fact that the elderly population in rural areas is growing dramatically. According to a new report by Transportation for America, by 2015 more than 15.5 million Americans over age 65 will live in areas with little to no access to public transportation. The study points out that the Baby Boomers were the first generation that grew up and reared their families in communities built on the assumption that everyone drives. With increasing age and spiking gas prices, this assumption cannot stand.

But even with these challenges, AARP reports that the vast majority of Americans over 50 want to stay in their homes as long as possible. Expansion of their transportation options, including trains, is the only realistic way to make that possible. By including some train stops along the city-to-city lines currently planned, millions of Americans will gain greater access to consistent and high-quality medical care. Better access means more Americans can seek help for chronic conditions that will otherwise spiral out of control and end up costing our overburdened health-care system even more.

Similarly, rural American schools have long struggled with attracting and retaining teachers. A nationwide survey of rural school superintendents conducted by the American Association of School Administrators and the Appalachia Educational Laboratory found the superintendents identified low salaries and social and geographical isolation as the main factors responsible for their difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers.

Train lines that allow, for example, Chicago area

residents to teach in Iowa, would make it significantly easier to persuade teachers to work in rural communities. With the ability to recruit from a broader talent pool, small country schools become more attractive to sought-after teachers and can compete with larger districts. In the same vein, rail can help attract urbane faculty to remote land-grant colleges with the promise of easy connections to cultural destinations like Chicago or New York.

Some prominent agricultural states understand these benefits and are ready to take action to give their citizens greater access to transportation. Iowa is a large area with a significant transportation deficit. Six primary airports and 31 Greyhound bus stations serve the state, which has more than a million rural residents and 30 million acres of farmland.

Recognizing that if it's hard for residents to travel out of Iowa, it's equally hard for outsiders – like businesses – to get in, the state has taken action to improve its infrastructure. Persuaded by the success of passenger rail routes in other, not-so-urban areas, Iowa put forth a successful application to establish service on the Iowa City/Quad Cities/Chicago route, which was chosen for funding by the Obama Administration.

In Iowa, 92 percent of the land is farmland. So maximizing the economic impact of that vital eight percent of urban land is critical to the future of this quintessential agricultural state. Unlike St. Louis or Detroit, business people and other travelers cannot take a conventional passenger train, or get cheap airfare, to Iowa City. Business owners in the Midwest economic centers looking to open new offices are unlikely to choose a place where the only real travel option is a six to seven hour drive. Iowa seeks to build on its already substantial economic success, while rural areas in Wisconsin, Ohio and Florida may see their businesses and tax bases move.



The planned Chicago – Iowa City line will be a conduit for rural communities in both Illinois and Iowa.

Iowa also expects to build its population with the train. Each year, thousands of out-of-state scholars attend a university in Iowa. With limited transportation options to even the larger cities in the state, graduates are abandoning Iowa once the caps and gowns are returned. But the proposed Chicago-Iowa rail line could change this situation, allowing alumni to enjoy the many benefits of Iowa life while still having access to amenities of Chicago.

Improved passenger-rail service will be a boon to Americans across the country, whether they travel from Los Angeles to San Francisco or from Hanford to Merced. Our overburdened roads and airways can no longer support our nation's need to

travel, making improved passenger rail an essential third alternative. Rail gives people the opportunity to travel efficiently and comfortably, while lowering our dependence on foreign oil and reducing pollution. The Obama administration understands that improved rail service will bring our vast nation closer together, allowing everyone to benefit from the economic, health and education benefits we have to offer. 

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