

C O M M E N T A R Y

Rethinking Commuter Rail

In the very first issue of *RAIL Magazine* in 2000, one of the central feature articles focused on a new commuter rail system connecting Dallas and Fort Worth. The Trinity Railway Express (TRE) launched in late 1996 and in addition to re-introducing passenger rail in the D-FW Metroplex, marked a fresh vision for commuter rail.

Indeed, the TRE heralded a new era in commuter rail in which leveraging existing infrastructure, technological scalability and adopting a regional-intercity-interurban service model has inspired places like Nashville, Salt Lake City, Denver, Portland, Seattle, Austin, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Albuquerque to launch successful commuter rail operations. Make no mistake, this is not the traditional commuter rail typified by the 5:15 afternoon rush and a rail car full of people in suits toting briefcases. No, as our coverage in this edition of *RAIL* highlights, commuter rail in such places as Orlando, the Mountain West and Minneapolis-St. Paul has evolved beyond this traditional role to connect communities and regions with service that includes off-peak and even weekend runs and with increased frequency of service.

The use of existing rights-of-way and corri-

dors – typically purchased from freight railroads – is a hallmark of the modern commuter rail revitalization. These modern commuter rail systems save significantly from the costs of building their own infrastructure. Additionally, owning the corridors allows these passenger rail systems to ensure their services take precedence over other operations along the line, and to develop a steady stream of income from freight operators seeking to use the corridor.

As these new commuter operations have grown in popularity around the U.S., a seeming off-the-shelf consist has emerged with the MotivePower locomotives and Bombardier cars. From Rail Runner in Albuquerque to Orlando's SunRail, this equipment has proven itself reliable and cost-effective and has become – in many ways – what the PCC car once was to streetcar operators: a universally-applicable, off-the-shelf vehicle option.



A key development in modern commuter rail is the regional connectivity these operations make possible. Like the interurbans of the early- and mid-20th Century, these new operations link together communities and regions and serve a far wider purpose than simply transporting a suburban workforce into a centralized business district. The Rail Runner, for example, serves a region that goes all the way from Taos to the north to Belen in the south, with a number of local transit systems connecting along the route.

A final trademark of modern commuter rail is how it has become a litmus test for passenger rail in cities and regions looking to rebuild rail infrastructure – as well as a way for communities to build momentum for even larger passenger rail networks that include light-rail lines and intermodal station projects. Certainly, the articles in this edition of *RAIL* looking at Minneapolis, Denver and Salt Lake City are proof of this important role for modern commuter rail. ■

Click here to hear *RAIL* Editors Scott Bogren and Rich Sampson — along with Brent Riddle, Senior Program Officer for Urban and Regional Policy at the German Marshall Fund — discuss the development of this edition of *RAIL*, and the commuter rail themes that emerged as the edition progressed. Don't miss this insiders look at *RAIL Magazine* #30.



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