



OUR VALUES

How to Realize Passenger Rail's Potential

This edition of *RAIL Magazine* is unlike any of the previous 36 issues we've published. Rather than a look at the nuances of individual passenger rail services and projects or the exact policy and legislative mechanisms that frame how rail systems are built and maintained, we're taking a broader look at some of the philosophic and cultural issues at play as a rail service is proposed, planned, designed, built and operated. These concepts are described in our collection of infographics beginning on [page 41](#), Dr. Laura Hartman's look at the moral and ethical constructs that underpin notions of complete streets and livable communities, our own discussion of the shifting role high-quality transit service plays in building vibrant places and [Rip Rapson's case study](#) of the many dynamics in making Detroit's M-1 Rail project a reality. In combination, these think pieces are intended to refocus the way we discuss and determine passenger rail priorities along the following key concepts:

1 Perspective – To many, the process of initiating a high-capacity transit service is relatively straightforward: decide what you want to do, obtain the necessary funding, build it and operate it. Of course, such a summation is over simplis-

tic. Important cultural, economic and historical dynamics are at work in any single community, neighborhood or district, let alone the combination of communities that are connected by a rail project. There is no magic wand that just resolves these concerns quickly to the complete satisfaction of all involved. Rapson's account of the numerous issues addressed by backers of the M-1 Rail project underscores the importance of a sustained outreach effort that seeks to understand and respond to community concerns and is perhaps the most essential element in any initiative's timeline. It also helps to illustrate one of this industry's most vexing challenges: why passenger rail projects cost so much, a topic [we explored at length in RAIL #33](#). It simply takes a lot of time and energy to bring people together around a common goal. And nearly always time is measured in money.

2 Building Place – Another misconception of rail and transit projects is their purpose is solely to move people. That viewpoint confuses objectives with tactics. Stepping back, transit and rail – like any public program or effort – ranging from education to trash collection – is to strengthen communities and allow people to

live more productive, enjoyable lives. For a rail or transit project, this means its ability to produce the conditions a given community determines essential to its identity or its sense of place – those things that make it unique, inviting and lasting. Dr. Hartman's piece on justice, hospitality and power outlines the prerequisites necessary to ensure those community values are achieved.

Nonetheless, we would do well to remember that as inclusive and responsive a planning process might be to these concerns, there's a larger apparatus of zoning and development decision-making to which even the most well-intentioned transportation leaders are denied access. Monumental public decisions on the locations of new commercial zones, medical facilities, housing developments, educational institutions and even military bases are usually made behind closed doors and with little consideration to how they impact existing communities and long-term mobility needs. Meanwhile, the determinations on land-use impact the direction of the places we live and work, other actors usually responsible for incentivizing behaviors and habits that make sustainable communities more difficult to achieve. Employee tax benefits prioritize easy auto commuting at the expense of affordable transit fares and wage and income policies perpetuate the spatial mismatch between jobs and housing. These are but two examples of systemic, societal problems that take much more than a great bus or train line to overcome. Those overseeing any kind of new infrastructure only have so much control

over what happens beyond the boundaries of their corridor or right-of-way, and often, too much blame is assigned by commentators to entities and leaders when dealing with forces beyond their jurisdiction or influence. You can't fix bad public policy with transit.

3 Community Priorities – One of the foundational principles of this magazine from its inception was to tell the story of the American passenger rail renaissance using a different vocabulary. Instead of talking about what kind of locomotive is pulling a train, we talk about the impact of a train station on nearby land use. Rather than focusing on the nuances of bridges and trestles, *RAIL* looks at a corridor's impact on job creation. We've maintained that focus because it's very easy to get caught in the weeds of how a rail line operates rather than the results it achieves for the communities it serves. While detail-oriented experts are vital to making the trains run on-time in the real world, transit advocates must position new projects through the ways they will benefit people, whether they'll ultimately use the new service or not. Our [infographics section](#) is infused with examples well-devised communications campaigns that explain what a rail or bus route will achieve, not how it will operate.

4 Modal Balance – So much of the dialogue on how rail transit projects fit within communities is tied to the precise mode being considered. And, to be sure, there are very real differences between these types of service that produce dif-

ferent cost factors and operational outcomes. These differences deserve open and honest assessments as part of the decision-making process. But there also seems to be very hostile lines of division between advocates of different modes, generating points of opposition that detractors of transit investment altogether use to turn public opinion against a project of any kind. When seeking communities with a strong sense of place and connections between such communities, balance is needed. A large rail transit network works best when accompanied by a robust system of frequent fixed-route bus service. Similarly, Bus Rapid Transit can set the stage for street-car or light-rail service later or on a different corridor. This notion is at the heart of our exploration of dedicated transit infrastructure. Modes that are seen as complementary and not competitive with each other are the key to building lasting support for sustainable transit investment.

5 Making the Case for Investment – It's easy to proclaim the need for balance between modes and a spirit of place-making in theoretical terms, but it's no secret there's a debilitating lack of long-term, dedicated investment streams for all kinds of transit at all levels of government. This reality means that communities have to make hard choices between a host of desperately-needed projects and also achieving the right balance between maintaining existing service levels through maintenance and overall while also preparing for the needs of the future with new or expanded options. It goes without saying that the public needs to put pressure on elected officials at the federal, state, regional and local levels to deliver adequate and predictable levels of investment, but it's also incumbent on transit advocates to help identify new and creative funding mechanisms, such as the [New Markets Tax Credits](#) that were crucial in keeping Detroit's M-1 Rail moving forward. 

