

Congressional Roundtable on Passenger Rail Security

Three influential members of the United States Congress agreed to participate in our passenger rail security roundtable. Each brings a unique perspective to these important issues.



Rep. Tom Petri (R) is currently in his 14th term representing Wisconsin's 6th District. He is vice chair of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee where he is chairman of the Highways, Transit and Pipelines Subcommittee.



Rep. Bennie Thompson (D) is serving Mississippi's second congressional district in his seventh term. He is the ranking member of the House Homeland Security Committee. He has also served as ranking member on the House Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness and Response.



Rep. John Mica (R) is serving his seventh term for Florida's seventh congressional district. He serves on the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure and after 9/11 authored the Aviation and Transportation Security Act.

RAIL: Our passenger rail services are, by design, open systems. Is it possible to strike a balance between ensuring the safety and security of riders while keeping these operations efficient and cost-effective? Should we be concentrating our safety/security efforts on higher-value targets? If so, what do you consider to be the higher-value targets?

Rep. Petri: It is imperative that we maintain a balance between security and mobility. Subway stations, ferry loading docks, or bus terminals are each unique environments and we can't simply import the aviation security model and try to apply it to transit. The Department of Homeland Security is the appropriate body to determine relative risk among public transportation systems. The elements that are currently considered by DHS are threat, vulnerability, and consequence. The relative risk levels among transit providers can shift depending on current threat intelligence and newly identified areas of vulnerability.

Rep. Thompson: Yes, it is possible to strike this balance. The first step, however, is making sure that the Department focuses on rail and mass transit security. The Department continues to focus the majority of its resources on aviation despite the attacks in London, Madrid and Mumbai. The Department must allocate the necessary resources and manpower to develop a comprehensive national rail and mass transit security strategy. To date, the Department has taken a piecemeal approach to rail and mass transit security.

Rep. Mica: With an open transit and rail system, it is difficult and almost impossible to create a 100 percent safe and secure system. Every effort should be made to balance the safety and

security of all of our rail transportation system. Our homeland security efforts must be focused on protecting people and reducing threats and risk.

RAIL: What are the lessons to be drawn from passenger rail terrorist events like those in London, Madrid and Mumbai in recent years? How vulnerable are rail systems in North America to similar attacks?

Rep. Thompson: The attacks on London, Madrid, and Mumbai are a stark reminder that rail and mass transit systems around the world, including those in the United States, are potential terrorist targets. The United States must be more vigilant and prepared than we are today. The Department of Homeland Security can no longer sit on the sidelines, it must become a leader.

Rep. Mica: With their various attacks since 1993, the terrorists have shown that they will change tactics and targets, and we must be prepared. The North American rail system is vulnerable and we must address those risks.

RAIL: What can be done with passenger rail station design to “harden” these targets? Are there similar design efforts underway with rail car design to make them more able to withstand attack and safeguard passengers?

Rep. Thompson: The Department of Homeland Security should be working with the Department of Transportation to harden targets. It is past time for the two Departments to begin working together to ensure that our nation’s rail and mass transit systems are both safe and secure.

Rep. Mica: It is almost impossible to harden all of our rail and transit passenger stations and vehicles. Funds can better be spent on addressing high-risk targets and penetrating terrorist

organizations, communications and finances to prevent attacks.

RAIL: The House Committee on Homeland Security indicates that the Homeland Security Administration and Transportation Security Agency spend vastly more on aviation security than they have on passenger rail security. Why do you think they have chosen this formula?

Rep. Petri: I disagree that DHS has “chosen a formula” to fund aviation security above all other modes of transportation. The Homeland Security Act of 2002, which transferred the Transportation Security Administration from the Department of Transportation to the newly-created Department of Homeland Security, specifically addressed aviation security requirements in the law. However, port security and surface transportation security issues were not addressed in the Act with the same level of detail. Therefore, these other modes of transportation have not received the same level of attention and funding at DHS as aviation has. However, that imbalance is beginning to change, with the recent passage of the Port Security Act and increased funding for surface transportation security grants being provided in the DHS Appropriations bills. It is clear that we need to do more to enhance security for rail, transit and ports, in addition to our ongoing efforts to maintain a safe and secure aviation system.

Rep. Thompson: The Administration continues to focus the majority of its assets and manpower on aviation security because it has failed to recognize that our nation’s rail and mass transit systems are at risk. Even after Madrid, London, and Mumbai, the Administration’s budget reflects this failure. Less than one percent of the Transportation Security Administration’s budget is dedicated to non-aviation security. The Administration’s budget

for research and development for rail and mass transit security is limited. Funds for rail and mass transit security grants are scarce.

Rep. Mica: Aviation has been and continues to be the prime U.S. terrorist target and on a risk basis should continue to receive priority funding. With the attacks on transit systems across Europe, the Middle East and Asia, the U.S. must also focus attention and assess risk for these modes of transportation.

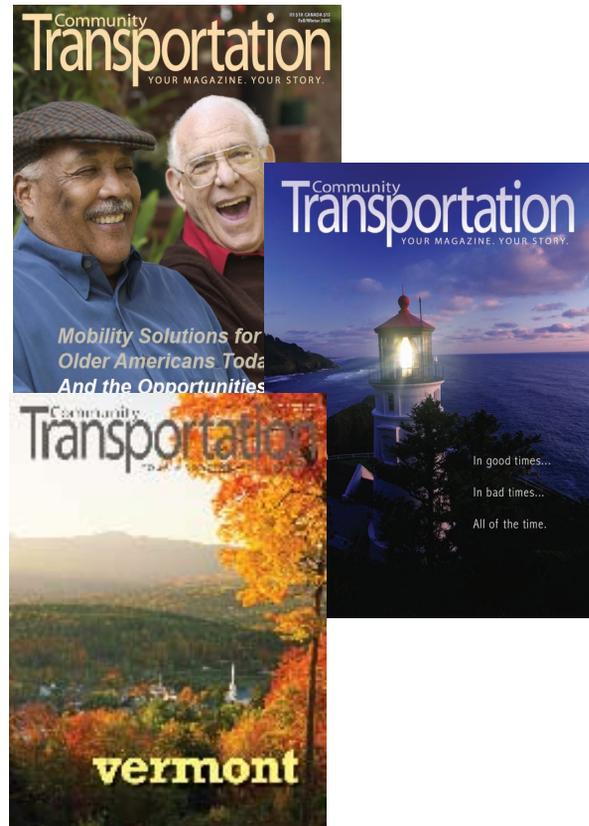
RAIL: Are you comfortable with the current safety and security training programs available for passenger rail employees and officials and for first responders to passenger rail incidents? If not, what would you suggest be done to increase training opportunities?

Rep. Petri: The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) at the Department of Transportation developed the Transit Watch campaign, in collaboration with DHS and industry partners, including the American Public Transportation Association, the Community Transportation Association of America, and the Amalgamated Transit Union. The program, designed for low cost and easy implementation, raises the security awareness of transit employees, riders, and the general public through the use of a media toolkit that can be customized for individual transit systems. Raising public awareness is one of the most important ways to prevent terrorism from occurring on public transportation systems. Transit employees must also be adequately trained to respond to safety and security emergencies of all kinds, whether or not they are terrorism related. In last year’s highway and transit reauthorization bill, SAFETEA-LU, we provided new authority for transit agencies to use federal capital funds for developing security and emergency response plans,

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conducting emergency response drills, and providing security training for transit employees.

Rep. Thompson: The current level of training is insufficient. More training is needed for our nation's front-line rail and mass transit system employees. We all know that the first few minutes after an attack will be critical. Without adequate security training, front line rail and mass transit employees will not be able to respond properly to save lives.

Rep. Mica: First responders and passenger rail officials and employees across the country must continue constant training for disasters and terrorist attacks. As we saw after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, federal, state and local governments and the private sector must have effective response plans in place to deal with these situations. We can never be too prepared.

RAIL: Are you aware of any

technologies that can be used to further increase the safety of those Americans riding passenger rail services? Do you favor increased security presence in systems and stations as a deterrent? What incentives can federal, state and local governments provide to passenger rail operators to enhance their safety and security efforts?

Rep. Thompson: The solution should be a layered approach with technology playing a key role. To date however, the Administration has failed to devote significant resources and manpower to rail and mass transit research and development. Technology will play an important role in deterring and preventing future chemical, biological, or radiological attacks. A dedicated funding stream should be created specifically for rail and mass transit research and development. Increased manpower is also required. The Transportation Security Administration

(TSA) currently employs 100 surface inspectors. However, the impact of these men and women is limited due to the scope of the system. More inspectors should be hired. Finally, TSA should do a better job integrating its manpower with Department of Transportation and state and local resources - improved coordination will increase efficiency.

Rep. Mica: New and sophisticated explosives and radiological detection technologies are being developed to improve our ability to detect and prevent attacks. Federal, state and local governments must partner in the effort to coordinate and better respond to disaster situations. The federal government must also continue to focus on intelligence efforts that will thwart terrorist plots.

RAIL: Is the responsibility for the security of passenger rail riders among the federal agencies and

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