

# RAIL Magazine's Priorities for Building Passenger Rail

Building on our recommendations for National Rail Security in our previous edition of RAIL, we have similarly developed a set of priorities for communities building passenger rail systems. Considering our profiles of Columbus, Phoenix, Nashville, and Kirkwood as case studies – systems that perfectly represent the 21st Century approach to passenger rail – the following five elements are essential components of planning, building and deploying passenger rail in any community:

**1**

All rail is local. A prerequisite to obtaining political will is the need to **craft passenger rail to meet the specific needs and big-picture goals of the community**. One-size-fits-all thinking does not work with passenger rail, due its significant scale and costs. While commuter rail might be appropriate in one region to provide an alternative to congested roads, another might find streetcars best to fuel economic development. Crucial to this is the need to involve the community at-large, along with their elected officials and representatives, early and often in the process to ascertain their needs and priorities for a responsive and vital rail service.

**2**

In every community that has successfully planned, constructed and/or initiated a passenger rail operation, **local leadership is critical**. Elected officials and public leaders are the key to creating political will for passenger rail service. As Columbus Mayor Michael B. Coleman puts it, “ideas need leaders and believers, and community support to build momentum.” That leadership is the spark needed to securing funding, leveraging resources, and generating support from the public to transform ideas and plans into reality.

**3**

Closely connected with choosing the right options for passenger rail is providing and taking advantage of **local investment and resources**. While federal and state funding in passenger rail is strong and growing, the key to unlocking that investment is contributions from the community. And while the examples of Columbus and Phoenix illustrate that local funding dollars are an essential, and perhaps the most important part of that puzzle, innovative thinking in Nashville and Kirkwood demonstrate that a community's existing resources of infrastructure, facilities and people are likewise valuable assets in making passenger rail possible. Moreover, the expertise and surplus resources of other communities and entities – as witnessed by the sharing of knowledge between Portland and Columbus, or Nashville's borrowed rolling stock from Chicago and Amtrak – cannot be overlooked.

**4**

As plans and designs for a rail operation are developed, the new service must not be formulated in a vacuum, but rather be considered as **a well-integrated facet of the community's transportation network**. Beyond the essential – and obvious – linkages to rail and bus transit systems, new rail services must also interact fluidly with the region's roadway, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure to offer the best mobility options for all travelers in a community. Commuter rail systems need convenient park-and-ride lots to become vital, while light rail and streetcar systems depend on many riders who walk or bike to a station.

**5**

While well-conceived plans, leadership, resources and intermodality are essential for a successful passenger rail system, the challenge of **maintaining good service** once it is launched is equally important. Often, expansion is viewed as the next step once a service is launched. However, the daily effort of ensuring a quality rail operation is hard work, and must be considered from the outset of planning activities. Concerns of maintaining the system's infrastructure, overseeing the workforce, building and sustaining ridership and numerous other aspects of rail operation are substantial ones, and the communities that have plans for how to approach them will find the greatest success.