

With high gas prices and airport delays, could we make our trains....A Better Way To Travel?

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EDITOR'S NOTE: After our November 4 issue went to press, the Senate approved the Lautenberg-Lott Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act on October 30. The bill is now before the House.

American spent about 3.7 billion hours stuck in traffic last year, burning gasoline whose price had soared by 60%. At the airports, security lines snake endlessly, runways are choked, and delays are common. One recent study found that, between January and August 2007, one in four flights arrived late; 159 flights were kept on the tarmac for more than three hours in August. As a result, more than half of U.S. businesses augment commercial air travel with expensive corporate jets and charters. Isn't there a better way?

One solution is staring us in the face. Many transportation experts insist that the best answer to transportation gridlock is efficient intercity rail travel. **Trains use one-fifth less energy than cars or planes. They run in bad weather. They're business-efficient and tourist-friendly.** Yet, since the early 1960's—with the exception of the Northeast Corridor, from Boston to Washington, D.C.—railroad transportation in the U.S. has become largely irrelevant. For most Americans, train travel from city to city remains an afterthought. And for good reason: Our national rail system is inadequate, relying on aging equipment and a shrinking route-map. The system sorely lacks both financial resources and government support.

"The transportation funding mechanism is skewed toward highway construction," says James RePass, principal executive of the National Corridors Initiative, a transportation advocacy group. "The game is rigged against rail."

In contrast, the rest of the industrialized world is investing heavily in its train systems. From border to border, Europe is wiring itself for high-speed rail. The result? Decreased emissions and increased productivity. Some predict the eventual obsolescence of air travel on the continent.

How did we fall so far behind? Blame it on our love affair with the automobile and a historical antipathy of legislators for subsidizing the nation's railroads. Our government's disdain for trains began with FDR, who in the late 1930s turned his back on fat-cat railroad barons asking for federal handouts. Two decades later, President Eisenhower certified our commitment to cars when he built the interstate highway system.

The current administration has been particularly unfriendly. Amtrak, which is federally funded, received just \$1.3 billion last year—the same as 25 years ago. Compare that to the \$40 billion allocated for highways and the \$14 billion for airlines in 2006. For the 2008 fiscal year, the Bush Administration pro- posed just \$800 million for the railroad—a \$500 million cut from 2007. In 2005, the President proposed pulling the plug entirely on Amtrak's subsidy.

Critics of federal funding for Amtrak argue that, since it was created by Congress in 1970, the railroad has never turned a profit and serves only a small percentage of intercity travelers. They believe the system is a waste of taxpayer money. But Amtrak's advocates in Congress point out that passenger rail systems around the world operate with government assistance. Others add that the government subsidizes our highway system and supports many aspects of passenger air travel.

“I’m amazed at the rancor about our numbers—they are so small,” says Alex Kummant, Amtrak’s CEO. “ It costs about \$1.50 for every man, woman and child to sustain this network—one cup of coffee per person. Look at highway congestion, environmental issues, the capacity of airline travel. For city-to-city transportation, we need passenger rail.”

As our airways and highways have slowed down, demand for train travel has been increasing. In fact, Amtrak ridership was up for the fifth year in a row, reaching record levels—despite the fact that a third of trains arrived late last year. In the Northeast, since Amtrak introduced higher-speed Acela trains in 2000, the railroad’s share of 10,000 daily commuters between Washington, D.C., and New York City increased from 45% to 54%.

“Train travel is the thing for a one-day business trip,” says Malcolm Edgerton, a Chicago architect who travels often from Chicago to Springfield on Amtrak for work. A recent trip, he said, “would have meant seven hours of driving, and I would have been exhausted. Instead, I left in the morning, did work on the train, got there at noon, did my thing, even had time to visit a museum. Then, on the way back, I drank Scotch in the bar car and traded stories with a salesman and another architect. The round trip was \$40.”

Experts predict that, with the population climbing well past 300 million, the demand for travel will only grow. Severe weather will further add to the transportation turmoil, leading travelers to look for alternatives to air travel. Witness the Midwestern storms last winter that forced the cancellation of more than 1,000 flights in two days in Chicago and St. Louis.

An efficient Amtrak, suggests New Jersey Sen. Frank Lautenberg, could have carried riders through those squalls in style: “How wonderful is it to get on a train, look outside at the snow and say, ‘ Ho, ho, ho, here we go’?”

The key to improvements may be federal incentives for state investment, say train watchers of all stripes. They point to two successful projects that relied heavily on state funding. Amtrak recently expanded service from Chicago to downstate Illinois and St. Louis, where ridership is up about 50%, and major improvements were made to the Philadelphia-Harrisburg line.

In light of those successes, the newly Democratic-controlled House approved \$50 million in matching funds for state Amtrak projects, and the Senate approved a similar program for \$100 million. “We are on the edge of a revolution in thinking and the thinking of policy-makers of the future of transportation,” says Rep. James Oberstar (D., Minn.), who heads the House transportation and infrastructure committee. “And that future is filled with high-speed, reliable rail service.”

Now Congress is considering legislation that would allow the trains to rebuild. The Lautenberg-Lott Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act, designed to completely overhaul the system, may reach the Senate floor this session. The legislation would commit \$10 billion over four years to develop high-speed, short-haul rail corridors modeled on the European city-to-city routes. They could run between Washington, D.C., and Charlotte, N.C.; Portland and Seattle; Chicago and Detroit; Miami and Jacksonville, Fla.

“We’re sick and tired, and we’re not going to take it anymore,” says Frank Lautenberg, who co-sponsored the Senate bill. “We spend money on all other means of transportation, but we already have the best thing right in our hand.”

Private-sector involvement also could boost service and revenues. Amtrak CEO Alex Kummant would like to see private, high-end luxury trains tacked onto Amtrak’s. Others suggest putting some of Amtrak’s routes out for private bidding.

“It’s not a nostalgic thing, like, ‘Let’s save the old choo-choo,’ ” insists Lou Drummeter, a sleeping-car attendant on Amtrak’s Washington-Chicago Capitol Limited for 20 years. “It’s a 21st-century answer to our transportation problems. People want an alternative.”

Can We Catch Up?

While U.S. railways have languished, the rest of the industrialized world has been building up its high-speed rail systems.

FRANCE Last fall, Parisians celebrated the unveiling of a new 200 mph TGV (Train a Grande Vitesse) linking Paris to the German border, where it meets up with Germany’s own high-speed InterCityExpress. In April, an experimental TGV run on the Paris-Strasbourg route hit 357 mph, while French fans lined the tracks, cheering.

SPAIN High-speed trains have run between Madrid and its southern cities for more than a decade. Soon they will cover the 375 miles between Barcelona and Madrid—the distance between Washington, D.C., and Boston, a 7-hour trip—in 2 1/2 hours. There’s even talk of a rail tunnel to link Spain with Morocco, beneath Gibraltar.

JAPAN The pioneer of the bullet train, Japan has developed a 360 mph magnetic-levitation, or maglev, train that rides a cushion of air. Propelled by the electromagnetic force of magnets, these trains are designed as complete transportation systems.