

Opponents of Amtrak rely on hard-to-understand ideological arguments

By ARTHUR FROMMER

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I am constantly surprised by the responses to my pleas for support of Amtrak. At a time when we are all so painfully aware of the need to limit the use of oil and reduce emissions of hothouse gases, I would have thought it self-evident that expansion of our railroads - the single most energy-efficient form of transportation - would receive broad approval.

At a time, too, when our air-transport system is falling apart - when planes wait for hours on airport runways and airports are crowded beyond belief - I would have thought it self-evident that we should expand the capacity of our railroads. If the tens of thousands of people who use Amtrak each day were forced instead to fly by air, wouldn't the result be sheer chaos at our airports?

And yet whenever I write, as I recently did, about the need to support Amtrak, I provoke dissent of an angry, ideological nature. Most cite, as their chief argument, that Amtrak makes no money. Without explaining why that argument is relevant to the operation of a public utility - and Amtrak is an essential, increasingly important public utility - they repeat almost endlessly and without supporting explanation that Amtrak must be profitmaking - or else be abandoned.

A recent response from one of these Amtrak-must-run-at-a-profit folk reads: "I personally believe this should not be funded with taxpayer money. We've been down this road before, and the results are not promising."

What's strange about these responses is that none of them makes the same argument with respect to cars and planes. The interstate highway system does not run at a profit. Yet every two years, Congress appropriates literally tens of billions of dollars for the maintenance and expansion of our interstate highways, so that more people can make long-distance trips by car. (Is it possible that the oil industry has something to do with that funding?) Operating those highways at a profit would require that each U.S. interstate become a toll road, demanding ruinous fees from motorists, and not one of the responders to my blog would be in favor of that.

The air-traffic-control system does not operate at a profit. Each year, Congress appropriates at least \$3 billion for air-traffic controls,

air-traffic towers and FAA safety operations. If the airlines themselves had to pay for the immense cost of air-traffic control not covered by taxes and fees, most of those airlines would be forced to shut down. Yet none of my responders would deny the need to keep funding the air-traffic-control system.

And there are countless other government functions that do not operate at a profit. Our fire departments do not operate at a profit. When the firefighters put out a blaze in a private home, they do not send a bill to the homeowner. Our police departments, public schools, municipal hospitals, sanitation departments and downtown streets do not operate at a profit.

And neither should Amtrak. Fares on Amtrak should enable low-income and middle-income Americans to travel affordably to their work or to meetings and for many other purposes vital to our economy and society.

All over the world, major national railway systems - like those in France, Germany, Spain, Scandinavia, the Baltic states and others - are subsidized from general tax revenues and do not operate at a profit. They perform brilliantly for their public. In the few instances where passenger rail has been privatized, fares often have skyrocketed in price and grave safety concerns have arisen; and even the private railway companies (like Eurostar) depend, to a considerable extent, on partial government funding.

If you have traveled recently on Amtrak's high-speed, comfortable Acela trains, then you have had a glimpse of what we as a nation could enjoy. Last month, the U.S. Senate took the first steps toward properly funding Amtrak, beating back violent attacks on Amtrak by Sen. John E. Sununu of New Hampshire, and supporting an enhanced appropriation by a vote of 70 to 22. The 22 dissenters undoubtedly are those who share the ideological beliefs reflected in responses to this column, or are beholden to the oil and automotive industries.