

OPINION

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Commentary

Enough talking: Get going on a national rail program

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Jim Seney

Face it. Every year since 1971, Congress and the administration (pick any one of each from either party during the past 35 years) battle over what is America's gimpy excuse for a national passenger rail system - Amtrak.

Consider what has been accomplished in that time span: The invention of personal computers, the birth and growth of the Internet, completion of the interstate highway system, cures or treatments for many diseases, space shuttles and space stations, even the Boston Red Sox winning the World Series.

And 35 years later, the richest nation in the world still can't produce a passenger rail system that is anything more than a Jay Leno punch line.

For whatever the good intentions of those who created Amtrak in 1971, it has since served as little more than convenient fodder for budget-cutters and an annual subject of debate over an appropriation that still amounts to less than 1 percent of the total federal transportation budget.

Yet somehow, Amtrak always survives and those in Congress who beat back the budget ax pat themselves on the back and bluster how they saved passenger rail in the United States. The reality? They haven't saved anything.

If they have, why is Amtrak's system map a mere skeleton of what it was when it started in 1971?

Ohio, for example, has fewer passenger trains than it ever had before or during Amtrak's existence and they run through the state in the middle of the night. With the upcoming demise of Amtrak's Three Rivers service that serves Youngstown, Akron and Fostoria, Ohio becomes even more of a donor state, getting less and less return on every dollar our taxpayers send to support Amtrak's budget.

The same is true in many states outside of the Northeast that are now served by Amtrak.

What this annual dance of the dead over Amtrak really does is distract us from the larger, more important issue: The critical need for a truly national program for the long-term development and funding of passenger rail and the improvement of our overall rail system.

Highway transportation professionals are predicting unprecedented double-digit increases in freight traffic over the next 20 years.

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials forecasts a more than 75 percent increase in overall freight traffic, making today's highway traffic seem like a Sunday drive. The association's report states America must develop and expand the capacity of its rail system for handling freight and people to manage the expected load on our nation's highways.

But this urgent call to action gets lost in the annual hot-air balloon festival known as reauthorizing Amtrak. President Bush offered up this nation's first passenger rail plan in 2003, but critics in both parties dismissed it.

True, it wasn't a perfect plan, but it was at least a good beginning for a better plan. We lost an opportunity to start developing the national rail program.

The Bush administration is again introducing a Passenger Rail Investment Reform Act as part of the president's budget proposal to Congress. And again, it is not a perfect plan. But it does begin to address passenger rail and rail infrastructure investment, and it's still a good starting point for a better plan.

It calls for far less funding for Amtrak and for the railroad to sell its ownership of the Boston-New York-Washington corridor. This is already rattling the cages of many Amtrak supporters and the battle cry of "Save Amtrak" is again diverting attention from the real issues.

We should be supporting the Bush administration's proposed Amtrak reforms, as long as they are tied to a fully funded rail development act and a reasonable continuation of Amtrak service during and after the transition. We should also be supporting a national trust fund that supports railroad development the same way the federal government does for highways and airports.

The nation's freight railroads should also benefit from such a plan by having greater capacity in their rail corridors to allow more of our nation's freight to move more profitably, safely and efficiently.

President Bush and Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta want Amtrak and passenger rail reform. I do, too. Most passenger rail advocates want a national plan as well.

But if both sides had only worked together in 2003, we'd probably already have a passenger rail plan in place and be working on amendments.

So let's get started. Isn't 35 years of waiting long enough?

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