

# **David Bear: We must act now to save U.S. train transportation from extinction**

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Is 2008 the year when Americans get back on track?

After a half a century of cutthroat competition from the country's highways and skyways, disregard from the federal government and disdain of the traveling public, the U.S. intercity passenger railway system is in tatters.

Even though every other industrialized nation recognizes the importance of having and subsidizing a vibrant intercity passenger rail system, the current administration in Washington has tried to eliminate subsidies entirely. Fortunately, these efforts have been forestalled, at least temporarily. The 109th Congress created the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission, which established the Passenger Rail and Working Group.

Last month Congress authorized a 2.4 percent increase in Amtrak funding for 2008 to \$1.325 billion, based on the working group's recommendations. That's enough to avert a total shutdown and begin modest improvements in intercity service. The working group has proposed an expansion of the Intercity Passenger Rail Network by 2050.

It's a start, but much more must be done. And quickly.

Passenger rail has long been dismissed in this country as a transportation dinosaur.

But with oil at \$100 a barrel, increasing gridlock at airports and highways, and growing concern about greenhouse gases, rail service deserves new attention.

In the United States, Pittsburgh ranks among the fortunate few cities that have any daily trains at all. We have three. There's the eastern Capitol Limited to Washington, D.C., via Cumberland, Md., which departs at 5:45 a.m. and arrives at 1:45 p.m., a seven-hour, 45-minute trip; the western Capitol Limited to Chicago via Cleveland, which departs at 11:55 p.m. and arrives at 8:40 a.m., a nine-hour, 45-minute trip; and the Pennsylvanian to Philadelphia via Harrisburg. It departs at 7:20 a.m., and arrives in Philadelphia at 2:50 p.m., a seven-hour, 30-minute trip.

Want to take a train to any other destination or another time of day? Too bad.

Couple this pitiful paucity of convenience and relatively time-consuming trips with a rollicking ride and reputation for unreliability and indifferent service, and it's no wonder so few travelers think of taking a train, even to Philadelphia, Washington or Chicago, let alone Buffalo, N.Y., Charleston, W.Va., Columbus, Ohio, or Cincinnati.

Besides everybody knows it's faster to fly and cheaper (and faster) to drive. But the calculations underlying those anti-rail assumptions must be refigured.

Factor in the time to get to and from airports, to comply with 9/11 security procedures, along with the possibility of schedule delays, and it's clear air travel is not as expeditious as it once was.

Intercity passenger rail works well in Japan, across Europe and Canada. It is subsidized everywhere by governments that recognize the fundamental role passenger trains play in the commerce of the country. Dedicated high-speed rail lines are slashing the travel time between population centers, with trains that surpass commercial airlines in terms of comfort, amenities and reliability.

Spain, for example, will have 4,350 miles of high speed rail by 2010.

Considering all the factors in the equation, modern trains use less energy per passenger mile and produce dramatically less greenhouse gas. According to the Executive Summary of PRWG's recently published "Vision for the Future," "National data indicate that passenger rail is more energy efficient than air and auto transport and that its expansion will reduce CO2 emissions, which contribute to global warming."

A recent study by BritRail found that trains emit 50 percent less greenhouse gases per passenger mile than automobiles and 25 percent as much as a plane traveling an equal distance while transporting many more passengers. And BritRail says more can be done to ease the environmental impact of trains, and it is instituting a range of "green" measures, including using low-sulfur fuel and biomass-diesels, as well as installing regenerative braking systems, a new technology that captures 20 percent of the energy of stopping a train and puts it into the national grid as electricity.

Obviously, creating a national grid of rail lines for passenger trains (as opposed to the current system where the vast majority of Amtrak trains are second-class citizens on rails where freight trains always have the right of way) will require a total change of thinking. Capital expenditures would be enormous. The PRWG calculates that its grand vision would cost \$8.1 billion each year to 2050. Sums of that magnitude seem beyond the range of private enterprise, but who knows? It certainly took plenty of federal funding to build airports and the interstate highway system.

Jet planes and automobiles will continue to be the most suitable mode of transportation for many trips, but the re-emergence of intercity passenger rail service seems inevitable.

It's a viable, even vital alternative elsewhere, and the sooner we embrace this reality, the clearer our nation's future will be.

To get more information or show your support, check the National Association of Railroad Passengers at [www.narprail.org](http://www.narprail.org)

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