

Transportation Crisis

<http://www.transitvillages.org/transportcrisis.html>

A CRISIS OF EPIC PROPORTIONS

The United States of America finds itself in a major transportation crisis. The serious decline of all forms of transport, evident even before September 11, has now become acutely obvious. A smooth running, efficient transportation system is the life-blood of any strong economy. It is especially needed now to respond to citizen's safety and economic concerns, to speed the recovery of America, and to set the country up for a prosperous future. Presently, the bulk of all passenger transportation in America takes place in airplanes and automobiles. Both of these systems continually experience serious problems and safety issues. Most importantly, both systems have reached their maximum capacity to effectively and efficiently move the masses. The nation must now develop an alternative transportation system embracing issues of safety, economic stability, national security, and environmental sustainability. The building of an extensive high-speed train network addresses these important issues, and is the best solution to our current and future transportation problems.

The horrific events of September 11 have demonstrated the fundamental weaknesses in the aviation business, while automobile driving has proven increasingly problematic. Neither form of transportation offers a long-term solution to our growing problems. Our nation's aging road systems are already overloaded, and therefore physically unable to pick up the slack left by the airlines. Huge investments, totaling hundreds of billions of dollars, are needed to shore up these ailing transportation systems to prevent further collapse. Many thousands of miles of roads and hundreds of bridges are in serious disrepair, and in need of replacement. Additional investments (also in the hundreds of billions of dollars) are needed to expand the roads and airports to meet current and future demand. Both forms of transportation have proven unable to meet today's demands without long delays and congestion, and even with increased investment, it's doubtful these systems will be able to meet future transportation demands. With so many people permanently seeking alternative methods of travel, the future of the entire airline industry is in question. A recent article in 'Fortune' magazine confirms the industry's unlikely survival. In a review of the industry's 2001 financial performance before the September 11th disaster, "the industry had already lost \$2.5 billion and was on track to lose \$3.5 billion, its worst performance since 1992. Now the losses will be truly staggering: between \$10 billion and \$11 billion." With heavy debt, rapidly increasing expenses, and very low operating margins, the reduction in paying customers will force most, if not all airlines into bankruptcy. Flying is no longer an economically feasible way of moving large numbers of people safely and efficiently.

Our road system is in a similar crisis. Congestion has reached such a serious state that basic mobility is in question as thousands of miles of traffic jams spread across America daily. According to a recent 'US News' story, congestion has been rising at an alarming rate: "Since 1982, while the U.S. population has grown nearly 20 percent, the time Americans spend in traffic has jumped an amazing 236 percent." Additionally, our roads are extremely dangerous as over 42,000 people die every year in car accidents – more than 12 times the number killed in the recent terrorist disaster. A recent study published in the journal 'Science' says that auto pollution kills even more people than car accidents. 'The Futurist' ran a story recently that points out how motor vehicle exhaust is the fastest growing contributor to climate change. "Motor vehicles accounted for 58% of carbon emissions from transportation in 1990, but their contribution grew to 73% by 1997." The prospect of making our roads safe, and ever building enough of them to solve the growing congestion problem seems unlikely due to the extreme costs. The amount of physical and environmental damage additional roads and airports would create make both forms of transportation an undesirable, unsustainable solution.

As unlimited investment in airplane and auto travel is unlikely to solve the present transportation challenge, there is a better alternative.

WHY TRAINS ARE THE SOLUTION

Investing in a nationwide, high-speed train system solves many problems at the same time. A new train system provides the best solution for improving mobility, stimulating the economy, reducing dependence on foreign oil, saving lives, and cleaning up the environment. A high-speed train network will free up huge bottlenecks in our transportation systems, encourage travel and commerce of all forms, and would create thousands of jobs with one of the largest public works construction projects in American history. A nationwide train system will solve the problems facing both the airline and automobile industries at the same time. Furthermore, it will cost a great deal less than fixing either industry. A new train network will significantly increase mobility in a safe, clean, fast, and efficient way. This will make it easy and pleasurable to travel nationwide in a seamless system of fast and sleek trains.

A new train system promotes many different goals for improving society. Trains are the most effective way to encourage smart growth, urban revitalization, and the creation of livable, walkable communities. Trains greatly reduce congestion and air pollution, while saving lives and preventing injuries. They are a sustainable form of transportation that strengthens and stabilizes our economy, can help break our dependence on foreign oil, and stem the transfer of our countries' wealth to the increasingly unstable Middle East. A high quality train system is a long-term, community-building investment that benefits many. It is the smart transportation solution for our society today, and well into the future. High-speed trains are a major form of daily transportation all across Europe, many of them making a profit for their operators, while providing safe, moderately priced transportation for the public.

GROUPS ORGANIZING IN SUPPORT OF HIGH-SPEED TRAINS

Numerous organizations, business groups, and political leaders are planning and lobbying for a nationwide high-speed train system. They include the House of Representatives, over 67 Senators, and more than 40 national and regional organizations. These include the National Governors' Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and the US Conference of Mayors. Recently, more than 300 mayors from across the nation gathered for the U.S. Conference of Mayors' 69th Meeting in Washington, D.C. to rally for increased investment in a national high-speed rail network. A High-Speed Rail Investment Act is currently working its way through the Senate.

THE TRAIN NETWORK PLAN

The new train system would be planned to become the primary American transportation network for carrying passengers as well as light cargo. The train system's customers would consist of the following:

- A large percentage of current and past airline customers looking for alternatives to flying
- A significant percent of automobile drivers seeking alternatives to congested roads
- Projected growth of both drivers and flyers encouraged by the affordability, safety, and convenience of trains.

The new train system would be made up of an extensive network of connecting train lines in a 3-tiered, seamless system as follows:

Top Level National System

This level of trains would serve as the national fast system now covered by airplanes. It would consist of all high-speed train lines connecting central cities together into a web of train lines across the nation. The trains operating at this level would be state-of-the-art Eurostar type trains that regularly travel at 200 –300 mph. These trains would offer a wide range of services making it convenient for business and leisure travelers. These would include the full range of seat configurations, lounge and dining cars,

sleeper cars, and business cars with internet connections, and various business and retail services.

2nd Level Regional System

This level of trains would serve as the medium-speed regional system linking the high-speed trains to the many regional destinations. They would connect to all the smaller cities and towns within each region. These trains would be top quality, medium speed trains capable of traveling at 125 mph. These trains would offer a similar wide range of services.

3rd Level Local System

This level of trains would serve as the local collector system connecting to the regional train systems. It would have stops in all neighborhood centers, major employment and retail locations, and sports & recreation facilities within each community. These trains would be standard quality, light rail, streetcar-type trains capable of speeds of up to 80 mph.

COSTS AND FINANCIAL SOURCES

The cost of a nationwide high-speed train system varies with estimates ranging from \$100-300 billion. This depends on the type of track and train technology selected, and the amount of land purchased.

Following the model of other transportation systems in America, the government would build the infrastructure, and private companies would run the trains. They would operate as for-profit franchisees to get the best competitive prices and services. The franchise operators would purchase their own trains and hire their own staff much like the airlines operate today.

There are a number of sources of funds to pay for the new high-speed rail system. One of the largest potential sources is what has been set aside for airport expansions and new airports around the country, estimated at well over \$200 billion. Presently, a number of airports have major expansion projects planned or in the works including Atlanta with a \$5.6 billion runway addition; Chicago with a \$6.3 billion expansion; San Francisco with a \$3 billion runway expansion; Oakland with a \$1.4 billion expansion; and Los Angeles with a \$12 billion full airport expansion, just to name a few. Now that travelers are seeking permanent alternatives to flying, many of the planned expansions will not be needed, and this money can be re-allocated to building the high-speed train system instead.

There are also a number of major road expansion projects coming under question due to the extreme costs for relatively minor improvements. Many communities are questioning the value of encouraging more cars and roads within their cities and towns. They are looking at issues of livability and safety, and comparing the differences to their communities with the same money invested in new train systems. These changes in transportation choices are freeing up hundreds of billions of dollars that can also be reallocated to building high-speed trains.

Trains make a lot more sense financially to transportation companies as they cost less than half the price of purchasing airplanes, hold nearly 4 times as many people, and use less than a quarter of the fuel.

PARTNERSHIPS

Wishing to maintain the status quo in American transportation is understandable, but denies an entire nation the best possible transportation system that is faster, safer, and more efficient. A general retooling of the transportation industry is needed. All the companies now in transportation could be included in the new system to keep them in business, save as many jobs as possible, and minimize competition and resistance to the new systems. The retooling would include new train system design, manufacture, operations, and maintenance, and could take place as follows:

Companies now known as airlines, rather than limited to managing air travel, would become "transportation providers" and invited to operate train company franchises. Airplane and auto manufacturers could start building trains, track, and parts. Airport operators could become train station operators. The FAA could change into the agency that oversee the entire operation. The Department of Transportation could plan the train network, instead of planning roads.

There are also a number of other American companies outside the transportation industry that would benefit greatly by getting involved in a new train system. These include resort, hotel, and theme park operators; travel companies; real estate developers; hauling companies; and package delivery firms. In addition, there are many train operators and manufacturers in Europe and Japan that would be more than willing to participate in building and operating a high-speed train network in America.

ADMINISTRATION

A new High-Speed Rail Authority would be set up separate from Amtrak to oversee the planning and operations of the new train network. The infrastructure and stations would be built and operated by the US Government, while the trains would be run by private train firms as a franchise - similar to how the airlines operate now. The new Rail Authority would operate much like the FAA, and would be charged with planning and organizing the entire system, overseeing the construction of the new track & train stations, selecting franchise operators, and overseeing all operations, scheduling, and quality control.