

INTERSTATE 2.0: GETTING RAILS ON TRACK



■ By Gil Carmichael

PRESIDENT OBAMA'S PROPOSED high-speed, intercity passenger rail network is a major step toward creating a sustainable, ethical, 21st century solution to our nation's badly congested, polluted and eroding transportation system. High-speed intercity passenger rail is a logical and necessary next step forward from President Eisenhower's massive Interstate Highway System of the last century.

Many in the rail freight industry have mixed emotions about allowing passenger trains on their rail network because it involves using their largely single-tracked rail system. They don't understand how they can successfully partner with the rail passenger industry to ensure freight business will benefit along with the nation.

While this new intermodal transportation vision would utilize their wide, existing freight rights-of-way for safe passenger transit, these two transportation sectors are not mutually exclusive if the rail network is properly upgraded for both high-speed freight and passenger use.

As far back as 1912, when many of our cities were born out of railroad expansion, approximately 80 percent of intercity passengers rode the trains. So did 80 to 90 percent of the nation's freight.

By the 1970s, with a rapidly growing population, mobile society, low gas prices and our love affair with automobiles, this new highway system became the darling of the federal and state governments, and passenger transportation segued to the nation's roads.

At the same time, many freight railroads were downsizing or bankrupt and asked the federal government to take over passenger transportation. The railroads, with this covenant, helped create Amtrak for passenger movement, and promised to give passenger trains priority.

With the economy in recession,

massive energy and environmental concerns, and a badly stressed, underfunded and congested U.S. transportation system, it is again necessary for passenger trains to operate on freight railroads' rights of way.

This vision of a shared rail system offers a superb opportunity for developing commuter, intercity and light-rail services in addition to solving the much-needed freight capacity problem. We have a 240,000-mile rights-of-way network in North America that government and private railroads have invested in for 150 years.

But after years of downsizing, it is probably operating at only 20 to 25 percent of its true capacity. By double- or triple-tracking at least 20,000 to 30,000 miles of the railroad mainline, we can build an ethical, rail-based transportation system in the next 20 years.

Concerns such as liability, grade-crossing safety, signaling, train-control requirements and capacity constraints remain within the freight industry. But there are solutions. Amtrak for years has operated on 20,000 miles of freight track and has generally indemnified freight companies for every accident. It can continue to do so.

The new high-speed tracks can be grade-separated, enabling Amtrak and its partners to run 110- to 125-mph passenger trains frequently and safely. With global positioning systems and positive train control, we have the technology to do this. It should cut highway fatalities by at least 50 percent. The degree of additional freight capacity built into a transportation system like this is obvious because freight train speeds can increase.

If we are to alleviate highway congestion, develop new energy alternatives and improve economic conditions, our rail network must reliably move people and freight. By 2050, there will be 400 million in the United States. Population density

will continue to be a mobility problem. For this reason, we must build "Interstate 2.0" — 20,000 to 30,000 miles of high-speed rail in partnership with the private freight railroads and state transportation departments.

Private railroads should be encouraged to upgrade and double- and triple-track their mainlines to increase speeds and double freight capacity by providing them with the 25 percent tax credit they requested.

The Interstate Highway System was paid for with a highway trust fund gas tax that is outdated and expiring. We should support this new intermodal freight and passenger transportation system with an "intermodal trust fund," one that taxes and supports all four modes of transportation. We should have an "intermodal freight trust fund" and an "intermodal passenger trust fund."

By using existing rail rights-of-way to run modern, intermodal freight and passenger trains, we will have a high-speed rail network that reconnects our center cities, major airports and ports, and recaptures the vital role of the intercity bus and transit industries, all in concert with freight operations.

This efficient, ethical transportation system will be safe, will not pollute and can be environmentally benign; it will not waste fuel, will not cost too much and will not destroy more green fields. Early in this century, we must electrify this rail network, providing the cleanest source of energy for our transportation system.

By building "Interstate 2.0," the U.S. can have a better transportation system than Europe has built or Asia is building, and one the freight industry, railroads and shippers alike, can depend on and grow with. **joc**

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