

## Fixing the Transportation Infrastructure: A Simple Public Works Project

There has never been a greater degree of conversation and talk over our nation's transportation problems than exists today. Ideas range from the rational to the irrational as ideas flow from the left and right. But to date, no comprehensive plan has been put forth that would create a 21<sup>st</sup> century *intermodal* transportation infrastructure to meet growing economic demands, as well as improve passenger and freight movement. The Obama administration has proposed an intercity rail passenger vision that would help address the crumbling infrastructure and create a large public works project; but takers have been too few. We are still thinking in a single mode only manner.

Lost in all the rhetoric about how to update the nation's dysfunctional transportation infrastructure is a single, cogent plan that can solve our problems of congestion, connectivity and fuel efficiency in a challenging global economy. The fact is however, that as a nation, we have already successfully dealt with a similar dilemma once before – in the 19<sup>th</sup> century! Today's solution should draw from and expand upon that lesson. We need only look to the building of the U.S. Transcontinental Railroad network that began in 1863 and continued to develop for decades, to see how a 21<sup>st</sup> century intermodal passenger and freight transportation solution can be achieved. Supported by Congress, this historic "steel wheel on steel rail" system ultimately connected the coasts for the first time, built vast cities in the west, greatly reduced passenger and freight travel time and created great economic vitality. It was a massive, yet simple economic plan much better than Eisenhower's Interstate Highway program of the 1950s.

As we continue to argue over freight versus passenger rail movement, we should remember that by 1912, when all of our center cities and ports were developing due to railroad expansion, approximately 80 percent of intercity passengers were riding the trains. So was 80-90 percent of the nation's freight. It was a *shared* rail system. And it worked beautifully! Following the building of Eisenhower's Interstate Highway System, by the 1970s, however, our growing population became an increasingly mobile society, enjoying cheap gas and diesel prices for private vehicular travel. Highways became the darling of not only the social order, but the federal and state governments, and freight and passenger transportation segued from the railroads, to the nation's highways and airports. Unfortunately, we built a mobility system based on individual transportation modes with a finite, largely foreign, fossil fuel source that at that time was funded on "increasing consumption."

We all know that is no longer the case. Nearly 150 years after we began to build this great railroad system, we live in a vastly more complex and technological global economy. Fossil fuel sources have been re-priced to very high levels; and our highways are congested, expensive and deteriorating. We

have failed to invest intelligently in a seamless, modern intermodal North American transportation infrastructure policy which has the railroads as its key element.

Transportation in today's high-tech global economy must be an *intermodal/internet-based* process that moves goods, people, energy and information. For most goods, this requires international containerized movement by ships, trucks and railroads; for people it means air travel and intercity rail. With today's technology, such as digital communications, Intelligent Rail Systems (IRS), GPS and Positive Train control (PTC), we could safely increase passenger rail speeds to 110-125 MPH, and freight speeds up to 90 MPH. We could do so while creating great efficiencies, reducing congestion, and cutting highway fatalities by as much as 50 percent. It would also drastically reduce the wear and tear and cost of maintaining highways – thus extending their life.

While we talk incessantly, we are staring at a simple solution to this 21<sup>st</sup> century problem. We have a fairly wide 240,000-mile rail ROW network in North America that is already paid for. In most cases, this rail network connects all of our major “center cities” and ports, but sadly not any major airports. The rail network, however, after years of downsizing, is currently operating at only 20-25 percent of its real capacity. But, by double- or triple-tracking at least 30,000-40,000 miles of the railroads' main lines, with grade separations, we can create an ethical and fuel-efficient, rail-based, transportation system that will transform our transportation landscape into a modern, shared intermodal system. This would meet today's challenges by allowing freight and passenger trains to share the same system once again, while permitting the fast container movement of freight on a global basis and permitting the development of a new North American intercity high-speed rail system. It's a win-win policy.

With proper planning and investment, this holistic approach to a North American “*Interstate 2.0,*” will be an ethical, fuel-efficient, intercity, rail freight and passenger transportation system. It will be seamless in nature, connect our center cities, ports, airports, and bus and transit lines, without destroying any green fields. It is a simple, but logical public works project – one that will require a working partnership between state agencies the private sector. This large public works project will also play a major role in restoring badly needed jobs and creating much needed economic prosperity. Done properly, it can be accomplished in 20 years. It's a simple, sensible fix.

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