The National Picture

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a rail advocate told Congress that a good national transportation system should be like a “3-legged stool”, with road, rail, and air being the legs. He stated, and we agree, that one of the legs is missing. We further state that modern civilization cannot long exist successfully without a rail-anchored transportation network. We Americans abandoned rail as the primary passenger-carrying “mode” less than 50 years ago, and we’re in serious trouble already.

Reasons that rail should dominate modern transportation are numerous and discussed elsewhere in the web site.

Freight rail at the national level is not doing too badly, so we’re ignoring it here. On the passenger side, local and regional rail is coming back all over America. But nationally, all we have is Amtrak.

The history of Amtrak includes periods of ignorant and top-heavy management, which the late David Gunn administration was trying to address and rectify, but that’s not its big problem. In fact, most discussion of how Amtrak is run (or not run) is a red red herring. Amtrak has three big problems:

- The inconsistent notion that passenger rail should pay for itself, when no other mode of transportation does.
    - This issue is discussed in detail in other places on this web site.
- Chronic underfunding.
    - Amtrak never gets enough money to do the job right. As a result, they have to fight with one hand tied behind their back, even under the best management. They have to make choices among necessities rather than take care of all of them. The prevailing attitude from on high seems to be, “If Amtrak needs a quarter, let’s dole them out a dime and then hound them to death for their poor performance.”
- Track sharing, or lack thereof.
    - In much of America, Amtrak shares the tracks with one or more of the

freight railroads, who own most of them. This is not always a bad thing – the management at Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF), for example, is fairly kind to passenger rail on their tracks. They consider track rental and incentive payments one more way to make some money. But the picture is not always so pretty. The Southern Pacific barely tolerates Amtrak, one result being that the Sunset Limited from Los Angeles to Florida is almost never on time. This problem of course tends to spread to every service connected to the Sunset. Freight rail used to pull over for passenger rail, but this is no longer true.

We submit the following suggestions toward improving this situation. NOTE: We admit these are sketchy, and hope to awaken the interest of like-minded people and groups more expert than we are.

- Keep in touch with our leaders. Let them know the importance of rail to your community and your nation.
- As for those leaders, and you know who you are – give Amtrak all they ask for and set up some kind of trust or endowment, a funding source free of the politics of the moment, to disburse same. It would be interesting to find out just how they handle it. We all might be pleasantly surprised. Well, maybe not rail opponents . . .
- Also, while we have your attention, how about working out some means to improve passenger priority along freight-owned rights-of-way? Dedicated track certainly comes to mind, but even if we're dreaming here, some combination of money, legislation and good-faith negotiating can still go a long way.
- Okay, back to the great unwashed (That's us, folks). Why not hold on to your "old" car a little bit longer, bike or walk to work and play when you can. By doing these things you will contribute less to a financially and environmentally insane system. And don't forget to let your political leaders know, repeatedly, that you want modern rail in your life.

OK, so now you are a rail advocate. What to help us out?

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