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By J.W. Madison and D.C. Gravning

Recent improvements around Albuquerque, such as natural gas buses with bicycle and car-pool transportation, and curb modifications at street corners, are reminders that some progress is being made to advance cleaner, safer and more sensible transportation. We at Rails Inc. are encouraged by this as well as by efforts of the Middle Rio Grande Connections, a long-term planning group, and Albuquerque's ACT Now program, which involves business in promoting alternative transportation during the Big-I reconstruction.

Those efforts emphasize some of the options to the increasingly wasteful, unhealthy and expensive attachment to cars which still grips much of the U.S.

But, some obvious and essential vehicles are stunningly absent from these advances — trains.

We do not mean vintage excursion trains, restored steam locomotives, and the like (long may they run!), but clean, modern, fast commuter and light-rail trains taking us to work, school, and play every day–not only residents, but also the many people who visit New Mexico.

First, some definitions.
Commuter trains are generally "full-fledged" trains with a locomotive and several cars equipped with rest rooms, a coffee and snack bar, and possibly receptacles for computers. They run between two or more large cities with stops along the way, such as between Dallas and Fort Worth. Commuter trains usually share track with Amtrak and freight trains.

Light-rail trains, also known as trams or street cars, are self-powered units of one or more cars which run on their own tracks within a city and its outlying areas. These tracks are usually in or near city streets and may be shared with cars, trucks, and

buses. The new Denver lines are a good example of this. Light-rail trains currently exist in numerous cities in the United States and many other countries.

There are various hybrids of these, and all modern rail cars are capable of carrying wheelchairs, bicycles, baby carriages, etc. In this article, we're not talking about sophisticated magnetic or bullet trains; they seem out of place in a state where we don't even have the basics yet.

Facts about passenger trains.

- A modern small automobile with two passengers generates almost 25 times the air pollution, per passenger mile, as a four car commuter train at 35 percent capacity.
- Two sets of commuter rail tracks will handle the passenger traffic of at least six lanes of highway.
- The tracks for a commuter train already exist here; those for a light rail system can be laid within existing infrastructure, preserving open space and minimizing land and business condemnation.
- A new light-rail line costs about a third of a new highway or loop road, and recent developments in track-laying technology can shave 60 percent to 70% percent off that cost.
- Trains are faster, quieter, and smoother than buses. In addition, they avoid traffic jams and most accident scenes.
- Modern commuter and light-rail trains are built to run forward or backward, eliminating the need for huge turnaround loops.
- Rail deaths and injuries are almost nothing compared to those in automobiles.
- Rail cars and locomotives will last 30-40 years with decent maintenance.
- Railroad tracks are cheaper and easier to maintain than roads and highways.
- There is no rubber tire disposal problem with trains (a much bigger issue than many people realize).
- Most skeptical commuters who try trains are converted within a trip or two.
- Commuter and light-rail lines have triggered a boom, revitalizing rundown

neighborhoods and buildings in areas where they have been located. Land values in older communities are rising, a dent is being made in suburban sprawl and even some long-abandoned hazardous waste sites are slated for clean-up, having become more attractive to housing, retail, and office developers.

- Railroad transit is a big part of the “intermodal” – or many modes of transportation – thinking that has become more popular nationally and worldwide every year – not to mention mandated by federal law since 1991.

The arguments against trains:

- You’ll never get Americans out of their cars.

  This argument has been effectively disproved in Denver, Dallas, Fort Worth, and Salt Lake City, to name but a few. In those and other areas, ridership has soared past all projections, and some suburbs are fighting for the right to get the next line extension.

- More and better buses will solve the problem.

  Although large, small and express buses are an important part of the transit picture, the fact is that nothing beats a train in most larger transportation corridors. And many thousands of people will ride a train who won’t ride a bus. Also, commuter and light-rail systems have been shown to increase bus, bicycle, and pedestrian use.

- There are too many scheduling and liability problems with Amtrack and the Burlington Northern & Santa Fe freight railroad.

  We have not yet talked to these organizations, but we know that these problems have been and are being worked out all over the West through good-faith negotiations.

- Passenger railroads don’t pay their own way; they require public subsidy.

  The fact is that no regional or municipal transportation system has ever “paid for itself” in the narrow sense. Passenger railroads are the only mode that is expected to. When you consider airports, streets, highways, public safety personnel (police, paramedics, etc.), our dependence on foreign oil and many other factors, it is evident that all forms of transportation in the United States are heavily subsidized. Even if you do not use a particular system, you still pay for its upkeep in taxes and other

costs. Transportation, like outdoor lighting, parks, and police and fire service, is a public investment for the common good (or it should be), and almost every civilized country and district in the world recognizes this.

- Our population in the Albuquerque area is too dispersed to enable an efficient rail system.

  This admittedly is the “best” argument against rail transit for our area. However, besides the fact that we have several rail-worthy corridors in central and northern New Mexico, it should be noted that rail transit systems make excellent pathways for guiding our inevitable future growth in livable and prosperous directions.

What needs to be done.

As part of our efforts, Rails Inc. has worked with and spoken with pro-railroad policy-makers and planners within various government and transportation agencies at the regional, state, and local levels. Our impression is that these people are few and lonely and have been “holding a candle in the darkness.” Our questions and statements to other policy people have revealed a stunning ignorance – willful or not – about true intermodal planning. Meetings are held, studies are ground out, the public is occasionally asked for their opinions, coffee and snacks are consumed, officials nod and smile (usually), and we still act like Los Angeles in the 1950s. We at Rails asked ourselves, “What is not being done here to foster a balanced transportation system?” The answer seems to us that nobody has seriously presented the public with a full menu of transportation options. which we hope to remedy. We found out that good transportation information is available (if you look hard enough) through MRG Connections and other programs. The problem here is three-fold: We are not yet quite as gridlocked as some other Western high-growth areas, although we are getting there fast (think ahead 20 years). There are powerful highway, automobile and sprawl-development interests with plenty of time, advertising money, and paid personnel to get their message to the public via television and radio. Most of our public has no direct experience with all the transportation options to make an educated choice. We think the cheapest, quickest, and fairest way to correct this serious problem is also three-fold:

- Identify the missing parts of the picture,
- Spread the word through traditional and electronic means,
- And promote the construction of demonstration projects involving these missing options or “modes.”

Rails’ five-point plan

1. A simple, comfortable, “beginner’s” commuter rail system on existing tracks including paved or graveled park-and-ride lots at the station stops.
2. A couple of well-located high-occupancy-vehicle lanes set aside for buses, car pools, van pools, and motorcycles, carved out of existing freeways or arterials. These lanes could be operated in conjunction with Albuquerque’s ACT Now initiative.
3. Conversion of at least one bus corridor in Albuquerque (Central Avenue comes to mind) from service by a few big buses to that of many and more frequent small ones, not forgetting natural-gas fuel, wheelchair access and those great bike racks.
4. A starter light-rail train, like a streetcar line, possibly linking the Albuquerque International Sunport to Downtown or the bases to the Northeast Heights along Wyoming. The former would use an existing spur; the latter, the latest in fast and inexpensive track-laying technology.
5. A publicity program promoting the above, along the lines of the campaigns for seat belts and sober driving.

NOTE: Good used railroad equipment is available for short or long-term lease. We don’t need to buy immediately.

Rails Inc, believes, and the recent experience of many American metro areas has proven, that if you build it right, they will ride. We further believe that our proposals are faster, fairer and possibly cheaper than yet another round of studies. Let’s give the public a full set of choices and see where that road (or, track) leads.

Our sources of information are available upon request.

Madison and Gravning wrote this article with the help from members of the group.

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