(From the Albuquerque Tribune, 2004)

In our Insight & Opinion piece (“Getting transportation on track,” Dec. 5, 2000), we tried to make the case for the return of local and regional passenger rail to New Mexico – a cause we’ve been devoted to for more than five years.

We didn’t have much company then. Now it looks as if we, and those in New Mexico who preceded us, may actually be making a difference. Commuter and perhaps light rail may soon be appearing at a station near you.

Combine this with the beginnings of renewable energy production – wind, solar – on a commercial scale, and we at RAILS, Inc., almost dare to hope that our state is finally putting the 1950s behind it.

For this, we’d like to tip our hats to the Gov. Bill Richardson administration, some members of the 2003 Legislature, the Mid-Region Council of Governments, the Santa Fe Southern Railway and a handful of lonely activists who have been working for this cause for much longer than we have. That siad, there are some things we think are important to keep in mind, if truly intermodal transportation is to succeed in New Mexico.

- Though we didn’t invent the idea, we’ve long advocated commuter rail *now*, starting with the Belen-to-Bernalillo segment. Sowe’re delighted that this is the way it’s going to happen. But let’s not forget that this is just the first leg. We need to expand to Santa Fe – and Socorro – as soon as we can.
- Let’s not keep getting entangled in some phony taxation/subsidy brawl. Taxation, fairly levied and competently administered, can be a good thing. The big tax question here is, “What do we get for our money?” And the answer is, “With ail, you get plenty.” As to the subsidy issue, repeat on omre time: *All transportation is subsidized – not least the auto/highway mode*. Many other countries and many other American states have long since demonstrated that any money publicly invested in good public transportation delivers a big payback that keeps on giving for generations. “Subsidy” sounds more like

shrewd investment to us. Note: Passenger rail doesn't really do all that badly in the fare box return department, either – 35 to 60 percent as a rule, compared to approximately 20 percent for "equivalent" bus service.

- Speaking of buses, we need them. And the experience of Dallas-Fort Worth, Denver, St. Louis and other metro areas shows that with a solid commuter or light rail "anchor," bus, bicycle, wheelchair and pedestrian patronage all rise.
- This new reail service must be regular, frequent, from early a.m. to late p.m. and comfortable. In other words, don't skimp on the number of "train sets" or quality of trains, station stops or parking facilities. Any extra start-up money invested in a nicer system will not be lost forever. It will come back as greater fare box revenue, public enthusiasm and mitigation of our many auto-related problems.
- Nor should we skimp on security or cleanliness. Let's face it, our New Mexico auto/highway/street system is not yet so bad that most people will ride badly run transit.

An underappreciated benefit of passenger rail service is its compatibility with renewable energy. A worthy example of this is the C-Train system of Calgary, Alberta. This popular and successful city-and-suburban transit line is powered in its entirety by *wind-generated electricity*, throught a public-private partnership we could all emulate. This is not sceince fiction or a feasibility study; they are doing it now.

New Mexico has wind farms, science facilities, bio-diesel, a prototype solar tower – all the basics. New Mexico should join with this proud company of innovators to advance the use of renewable energy.

Let's not think too much about bullet trains, high-speed rail or other super-systems right now – not until we get the simpler and cheaper systems right. ONce the public accepts and appreciates everyday rail and transit travel, then maybe some day . . .

In summary, passenger rail with its feeder services is one of those issues that has a way of lifting seemingly unrelated issues up with it. W've made a great beginning.

Let’s make sure we do it right.

J.W. Madison
Rails, Inc.

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