

A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON PASSENGER RAIL TODAY

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ABSTRACT

The Northeast Governors view passenger rail as part of a national system which is intermodal, has joint federal-state roles and responsibilities, and receives some form of public financial support in recognition of the public goods and services provided. The current passenger rail system, which faces serious economic challenges, must be reviewed and updated to ensure that safety and efficiency are optimized. Safety, efficiency and reliability are important to rail's ability to provide services which will attract ridership in an increasingly competitive and economically challenged market. The system's investing partners must have a voice in decisions on the direction and refinement of the national rail system.

The Northeast's long experience in providing passenger rail on a multi-state basis offers some important insights about intercity passenger rail. While many think of the Northeast rail system as unique or parochial, what has and will happen to the Northeast's passenger rail system mirrors challenges and opportunities in other regions. What happens in the Northeast is also important to the overall health of the passenger rail in the country.

The Northeast states perspectives can be summed in four key points:

- First, an integrated, multi-modal national transportation system is critical—now more than ever.

- Second, that system requires a continuing partnership of the federal government, states and the private sector. No individual transportation mode can be expected to be financially self-sufficient, since all are expected to provide public goods and services.

- Third, rail is a critical element in the Northeast's and the nation's multi-modal transportation system.

- Finally, in the Northeast, states are investors of longstanding in the region's rail transportation system—a pattern which is occurring is across the country. Such investors expect to have voice in decisions on the direction and refinement of the national passenger rail system.

An integrated, multi-modal national transportation system supported by the federal government, states, and private sector is critical now more than ever.

An integrated, safe and adequately financed national transportation system is a critical underpinning for the nation's economic, social and environmental well-being. The nation's highway and rail infrastructure provide essential mobility for people and goods in urban, suburban and rural communities. It's not just transportation—it is also economic development and the quality of life.

- In the Northeast, as in the Southeast, Midwest, Intermountain West, and West Coast, the infrastructure and transportation system are critical links in the national and international economic system. While the Northeast's transportation network may be more extensive, diverse and aging than those in other parts of the country, we share a common interest in a safe, integrated and multi-modal system. The various regional networks, which reflect the particular geography, history, economy and political culture of its states, are melded together to create a vibrant national transportation system which can meet our diverse needs.

- An extensive system of highways, bridges, transit—and their connections to air and water-based ports—facilitate the seamless flow of people and commerce among the states. They also tie the regional markets to the nation economically, thus contributing to the nation's ability to compete in a global economy. Materials and finished goods generated in one region are distributed on this system to markets throughout the nation. Border crossings and port facilities are gateways to the global marketplace.

- While the system does have distinct regional profiles, certain elements must be national if the goals of safety and efficiency are to be achieved. In rail, consistent nationally applied standards for signals and communications are the bedrock of safe operating systems. Ticketing is more efficient and accessible if a potential traveler can readily obtain information on routes, fares and connections for travel anywhere in the nation. Surely there must be lessons for passenger rail in the increasing movement of freight rail and aviation toward partnerships and consolidated systems which can provide coordinated service across the nation and the beyond its borders.

- The federal government continues to have any important stake in the safety and efficiency of this integrated, multi-modal transportation system.

No transportation mode can expect to be financially self-sufficient. Like our interstate highways, air and seaports or transit systems, investments in rail are based on the need to enhance safety and efficiency. A continuing public role is a critical element in achieving the valued public goods which are possible from an integrated transportation system—goods

such as clean air, fuel conservation, fullest use of the existing capacity, and improved mobility .

Rail is a critical element in the Northeast's and the nation's multi-modal transportation system.

Faced with pressures to reduce congestion, improve mobility, use scarce dollars efficiently, reduce operating costs and improve the environment, decision-makers in both the public and private sector share a common goal of making the nation's transportation system function more efficiently and effectively.

While all modes make a unique contribution to the complex fabric of regional and national mobility needs, the rail network is a critical element in the Northeast's transportation system. Passenger rail is an increasingly attractive option in other parts of the country.

- The eastern passenger rail network is extensive and diverse, serving multiple transportation needs and population groups. It is composed of a network of corridors which link together major urban areas, move freight and millions of commuters, provide access to smaller communities and rural areas, and connect the Northeast's cities and towns with those to the west and south. The "natural" eastern intercity rail system stretches from Portland, Maine in the north to Raleigh/Charlotte in the south, and reaches across an international boundary to Canada. It includes:

- The Keystone Corridor which links Philadelphia to Harrisburg;

- The Empire Corridor from New York City to Buffalo and the Lake Shore Limited running from Boston to Albany, New York provide local access to large and small communities as well as an important route to the Great Lakes and points west;

- Planned service between Portland, Maine and Boston which will open up new north-south service as population and economic growth expands in new directions;

- Corridors to Atlantic City and Hartford/Springfield which provide for both employment and recreational travel; and finally,

- The rail portion of this densely populated, heavily traveled Corridor from Boston to Washington which is a major factor in the region's ability to avoid total gridlock on highways and airways.

The Northeast states are pleased by the tremendous growth in support for intercity passenger rail at the more southern end of the this corridor.

- Efficient use of these corridors dramatically contributes to the overall effectiveness of this multi-modal

transportation network. Investments which improve the quality of intercity passenger rail service contribute to better performance by other modes. Reduced, reliable travel time between Boston and New York City can draw travelers from cars and airplanes, helping to reduce highway congestion and allowing congested air slots to be used most efficiently. An effective rail network is a component in the region's ability to improve its air quality by reducing indigenous emissions.

- The notion that a rail corridor requires population density to be effective is being debunked. Rail does work in rural areas, offering new opportunities but posing new marketing and operational challenges beyond providing tourist travel.

- The Vermonter, with support from the state, provides destination service to tourism opportunities in one of the nation's most rural states; while interest is growing in providing east-west passenger rail in the under served northern new England areas of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. Intercity passenger rail's congressional partners are seeking opportunities to support this effort.

Prudent investments in intercity passenger rail also contribute to the economic well-being and competitiveness for the northeast and the nation.

The Northeast serves the national system as a test bed for passenger rail technologies.

- Testing of advanced grade crossing technologies in Connecticut will contribute to rail safety and open up opportunities for passenger rail throughout the country.

- The Northeast is pleased that its commitment to improving intercity passenger rail led to testing of newer equipment technologies in the U.S. One result is that the Talgo tilt train, tested in the region, is now in service in the Pacific Northwest system. New York's investments and its leadership in demonstrating a 125 mph turbo train on the Empire Corridor also offers benefits for non-electrified service.

- Massachusetts' agreement to develop a mail handling facility on the inland route across the Commonwealth will maintain this intercity route even as it helps Amtrak develop an important revenue generating market.

- Work on the high speed corridor, including Bombardier's development of the high speed train sets in Barre, Vermont and Plattsburgh, New York, has important economic ripple effects as it draws upon technologies and economic partners across the nation.

In the Northeast, states are investors of longstanding in

the region's rail system—a pattern which is emerging across the country. Such investors expect to have a voice in decisions on the direction and refinement of the national rail system.

■ Rail has faced a climate of uncertainty since a national system was knit together in 1970. Absence of stable and predictable funding, under-investment and deferred maintenance, competition from discount airlines—all these contributed to unstable economic climate. Route systems were often designed in ways which did not encourage competitive efficient service which would attract desired ridership.

■ In the Northeast and across the country, states and other users are making important contributions by financing infrastructure renewal, rebuilding cars, acquiring new trainsets, developing new motive power systems, adding new services, investing to maintain the services, restoring stations and integrating freight service.

■ Careful capital investments and design of operations, routes and services can lead to growth and help improve return on investments. The system must increasingly work with market forces—such as pricing, marketing levels of service, reliability and dependability to attract ridership. However, like every other mode in the nation, intercity ridership will continue to require some level of operating assistance as well as sustained capital investment

in order to achieve the social and economic development benefits desired by citizens.

■ The Northeast is unique in the substantial capital investment which both the states and the federal government have made in the rail infrastructure. With the states and federal government having ownership and control of this asset, responsibility for its maintenance and operation is a public responsibility. For example, from 1988 through 1993 Amtrak and other users in the Northeast Corridor spend an average of \$479 million annually on the Corridor's operations, maintenance and capital improvements, with 58 percent of those funding coming from the states and other users. Therefore, it is vital that this transportation asset—built with public and private sector investment and which serves as the linchpin of the national passenger rail system—be maintained and strengthened.

The Northeast Governors recognize that the debate before the nation is what type of national passenger rail service will move us into the next century. Over the past several years, passenger rail has been undergoing important changes and it will continue to do so—not only in equipment, services, routes, but also in institutional and operating structure. It is critical that the views and diverse needs of the corridors which are the underpinning of the national system be fully considered.