

RURAL PERSPECTIVE ON RAIL

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Meridian was founded as a railroad community in the 1850s. The people of Meridian rebuilt the railroad in just 25 days after Sherman's march had destroyed it in 1864 because the rail line was the life blood of the community. Rail lines are still the life blood of smaller communities in rural America today.

With a population consisting largely of those on fixed incomes, low incomes, the elderly, and single parents, rural areas depend on rail passenger service as an affordable option. Air transportation is not available in some places and is too expensive where it does exist, and poor people do not always own reliable vehicles for long distance trips.

When Amtrak cut service on the Crescent line, each small city alone would not have had enough clout to make its voice heard. So representatives of many small cities between New Orleans and Atlanta banded together to form the Crescent Corridor Coalition, which undertook the following actions:

- Testified before Congress on the need for a national rail passenger system;
- Joined forces with the Northeast Corridor Initiative, underscoring the mutual dependency for rail service in both urban and rural areas; and
- Worked with Amtrak to market travel packages more aggressively to make each line reflect the culture and interests of the people in that market.

The result was an increase in ridership and revenues along the Crescent route.

Local community involvement is critical to the success of specific projects that support intercity rail passenger services, such as upgrading and restoring train stations that are traditionally gateways to the community. For example, Meridian's own \$7-million station and intermodal center project has already begun to generate economic benefits to the community before it has even opened. Local involvement in eliminating grade crossings can generate both a short-term benefit to improve the efficiency of railroad operations and the long-term benefit of increasing the speed of operations. Train travel can also be packaged and promoted along with local and regional events, such as sports, festivals, and exhibitions, by featuring regional food and attractions.

We have come a long way since Bob Dole announced that Congress would cut "everything from Amtrak to zoological gardens" for several reasons. First, we have not allowed ourselves to be splintered into rural vs. urban factions. We have been consistent in support for a truly national rail passenger service. Finally, we have been unified in seeking the capital funding that Amtrak needs, whether from the half-cent gas tax or some other form.

In conclusion, the needs of rural residents must continue to be stressed. For these people, eliminating one of their few travel options is unacceptable. We need to continue to build and maintain coalitions representing the broad spectrum of constituencies. Finally, we must make a concerted effort to involve more communities in supporting passenger rail. Of the 540 Amtrak stations in the country, most are in small cities—the heart of America.