

Preservation of Rail Corridors in Urban and Suburban Areas Is Critical

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The single most important transport action a community can take today is to preserve its railroad rights-of-way and other corridors for future transport needs, particularly for light rail transit (LRT).

During the last dozen years, a "quiet revolution" has occurred in North American transit as cities in the United States, Canada, and Mexico have developed LRT systems, in many cases using existing railroad or streetcar corridors. Several dozen cities currently have LRT in the planning, engineering, construction, or operating stages. LRT appears to have a great future, yet the loss of rail corridors, which have contributed to holding down the cost of LRT construction, is a real threat to further LRT development.

One of the truly great assets of many American cities is the legacy of railroad corridors, which can be made available for LRT use at minimal cost. Railroad restruc-

turing has rendered some of these corridors redundant, a few have already been abandoned, and a number are only lightly used. Now is the time to begin preserving these rail corridors for future LRT use—before some of them are abandoned and used for

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other purposes. They cannot be replaced, except at great cost. When many streetcar lines were abandoned, the private rights-of-way were used for parks, roads, alleys, and the like, or even for building sites, and were generally lost to easy reuse for transit. Preserving rail corridors for future transit use is a public, not a railroad, responsibility. Smaller cities with growth potential should not overlook the need to preserve such corridors.

In some cases it may be necessary to pay fair market value for the land, and in certain metropolitan areas the cost can be quite high. In other cases, though, the railroads simply remove the track and abandon the land. Railroads are becoming increasingly aware of the value of their rights-of-way for rail transit, as indicated by the agreement of the Southern Pacific Transportation Co. to sell 175 miles of right-of-way for possible

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commuter use in Southern California and the public statement of the Union Pacific Railroad Corporation about actively talking with transit people. It is likely that areas that have active rail transit authorities and real estate of high value will find the railroads ready to work with them. Nevertheless, areas will remain in which the present value of the real estate or the present state of the rail transit interest will be insufficient, and the land will revert to other uses.

The existing "rails-to-trails" preservation approach is not adequate alone. Too often, the preservation decision is based more on the desires of the trail advocates than on any expectations of future railroad or rail transit needs.

There is a real need for a federal law that "rail banks" railroad rights-of-way in urban areas on abandonment for future use as rail transit. Such a law

- ▶ Would provide benefits in the form of future cost savings on rail transit construction;

- ▶ Would need to provide compensation to the railroads where appropriate;

- ▶ Would not have a detrimental effect on the railroads (abandonment procedures would not be changed);

- ▶ Would not harm the adjacent landowners (they or their predecessors sold the land or gave an easement for railroad purposes, and that is what rail transit is—a passenger railroad);

- ▶ Could permit adjacent landowners to use the land in the interim, provided they did nothing to impede a future rail line (no high-rise construction across the line, no major excavations, etc.); and

- ▶ Would offer an alternative in areas in which adjacent landowners object to a hiking or biking trail.

The primary objective is to preserve the land as a transportation corridor in cases in

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which the railroad would otherwise simply abandon it. The secondary objective is to provide for purchase of the land at fair market value in cases in which the railroad can sell the land for other uses.

American cities will increasingly turn to rail transit to enhance urban mobility (and avoid gridlock), protect the environment, conserve energy, and improve the quality of urban life, but some of the railroad corridors may not be there when needed unless steps are taken now.

Now is the time for action, while these corridors are being vacated by the railroads and are still available. These rail corridors must be preserved for future LRT use and protected from highway and commercial construction. They cannot be replaced, except at great cost. Preserving them is a public responsibility.

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