

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Focusing on the Northeast Corridor

As you probably know, Amtrak is the majority owner of the 457 mainline Northeast Corridor from Boston to New York to Washington, D.C., which is by far the busiest rail corridor in the United States. It's so busy it serves about 250 million passengers a year. We run over 2000 passenger trains on the corridor a day plus about 50 freight trains. And we're literally reaching the limits of capacity at certain key bottleneck choke points along the corridor, particularly around New York-Penn Station, as you can imagine. Everyone understands how busy that station is. Not just from a people point of view, even walking around the station, but also the tracks feeding into Penn Station under the Hudson river: there are just two of those and they are incredibly constrained. You know trains traveling 2 ½ minutes through those tunnels. So as we look out into the future about how to meet the need for growth on the corridor, we have plans to make a series of improvements to the existing corridor, but we've also realized through a series of studies and consultations with the other commuter rail agencies that operate over the corridor in the other states through which the corridor runs, that to take sort of the next, to jump to the next level we need two additional tracks for more capacity, for more room to run trains on the corridor. And if we're building two more tracks we might as well devote those to high speed rail operations. So Amtrak has a vision plan for the Northeast Corridor and that contemplates plans basically to get the maximum utility out of the existing rail corridor up to the year 2025, and then 2025 to 2040, is to build two new tracks for high speed trains along the length of the corridor and this would be modern, international standards for high speed rail with trains traveling up to 120 mph dedicated for those high speed trains. And really it's not just about speed, high speeds and trip time; it's really about being able to move so many more trains on the corridor, have much more frequent operations, to give people really a great amount of flexibility in how they travel up and down the Northeast Coast.

Repairs & High Speed Rail

When we go out and talk to people from government agencies and partners to the media or business groups, I think everyone gets that the Northeast Corridor is a place in the United States where rail travel really works and where we generate a net operating profit on our operations for the corridor. We beat out air travel for the city pairs, traveling New York to Washington; Amtrak captures ¾ of the market, the air/rail market and about over half—about 55% between New York

and Boston. So I think everyone understands that rail travel really makes sense in the Northeast Corridor. I think what's difficult is these investments take a lot of time; it's not easy to make improvements to a rail corridor that is operating so many trains per hour. So anytime you want to do major track work or place a bridge or repair the overhead catenaries lines, all of that involves very skilled labor to come in and do the work, and outages that affect the travel that people depend on a daily basis. But then I think there's also sort of a messaging issue, which we've been dealing with for a long time because these projects are so expensive and when you do them they might just get you what you had before, but in good repair. It's kind of hard to sell those to the public. One example is the Baltimore-Potomac rail tunnels, which are masonry tunnels, built in the late 1800s: the trains have to slow down to 30 mph to go through them. They require more expensive, more frequent maintenance because they're so old. Well, it would probably cost about \$2 billion to replace those tunnels and what you get at the end of that is two new tunnels. You know, the trains will be able to travel a little bit faster, you'll get some trip time savings, but it's not as sexy as a brand new project that provides new access to a new market or cuts travel time very significantly. So I think that's one of the reasons that in addition to fighting the good fight for bringing the Northeast Corridor back to a state of good repair and making sort of the incremental improvements we need to keep up with market demand, Amtrak is also pursuing this high speed rail vision which I think has more of a potential to capture people's imagination; it has the ability to shrink time distances between key city pairs and really sort of shrink the map of the Northeast, so that New York and Philadelphia, instead of being an hour and a half by train today or an hour and ten on the Acela could be 30 minutes apart from each other. And you have basically all the major cities on the Northeast Corridor within an hour and a half of each other. Those types of trip times, which we could achieve by 2040 with high speed rail, really change the dynamics of business travel in the Northeast, of business relationships and collaboration among the different economic sectors in the Northeast. And it really I think provides that economic boost for the Northeast Mega Region as a whole to compete in the global market place.

High Speed Patience

Well I think that everyone has to understand that there is quite a long lead-time in planning these incredibly complex high speed rail systems. The Obama administration launched the high speed intercity passenger rail program in 2009. Prior to that, prior to the passage of the Passenger Rail Investment Improvement Act bill, which established rail policy for the United States, there really was no federal program for funding high speed rail. And there were very unreliable annual appropriations to Amtrak to provide capital and operating subsidies, but other than that we didn't really have much of a rail program. So as a result there wasn't much rail-planning going on in the United States, so when Obama made the big announcement about the rail program and it was very exciting and

people's expectations were very high. I think then there was a period of disappointment that it didn't happen as fast as people might hope. But the truth is that was sort of day one. And to design a high speed rail system and to advance a plan and do environmental review and get the funding, all of that takes a very long time. So California's actually I would say further ahead than Amtrak I would say in its plans for high speed rail for the West Coast than we are for our next gen system for the East Coast, although we're further ahead in that we operate a railroad system today that serves 250 million people a year or that is shared by partners serving that many people, and so we have the ability to make upgrades to the existing system to higher speeds as we go along. So just as an example, one of the stimulus projects that Amtrak secured a grant for is called our New Jersey high speed rail improvement program, and that's a \$450 million program that will allow us to make improvements to a stretch of track in central New Jersey that basically becomes sort of our model high speed rail stretch of the railroad. This is where we can install what are called constant tension catenaries systems, which really allow the trains to travel at the top speeds. It allows us to upgrade the electrical system, which powers the trains on the corridor, which is another capacity constrain on the railroad. You think, well is there room enough to run the trains? But then you have to also ask, is there power enough to get these trains up to high speeds and run them frequently? So on this stretch of railroad in New Jersey, we will be making those improvements and so that will serve as a model of the improvements we wish to make along the entire lengths of the corridor. So that's a start. And that construction will get underway this coming summer 2013 and then proceed over the next couple years. But we have to be completely upfront and honest that these projects take a long time. They take a lot of money and they are lengthy projects, so that just sort of helps people understand the timing.

Citizen Engagement

I think that it helps whenever citizens contact their members of congress or their elected officials to let them know that infrastructure is a priority. Unfortunately, I look at some of the polling about different issues that are at the top of people's minds and infrastructure doesn't always rate highly. I think it's because it's one of those things you take for granted that it works and you don't notice it unless it fails. And then it's too late and you're in a disaster situation. But it's really important for people to understand the importance of infrastructure and to express it to their elected officials. But I think the reason it's important is because of the economy. I mean infrastructure is sort of what needs to be in place for the economy to run smoothly. And if we're looking for ways to expand economic growth, to create jobs, infrastructure investment is an investment that pays dividends for years to come. You know from the first infrastructure spending that creates construction jobs to the secondary effects for years to come of creating better access to economic markets. And in the case of high speed rail bringing cities closer to each other in terms of travel time and forging more connections

for business travel, increasing the size of economic clusters, and sort of allowing people to collaborate more face-to-face, which really expands knowledge and helps power economic growth. And then the other thing—this is sort of in the tough part of it—is that we have to pay for this stuff. I mean really it costs money. And I think we as a country are very lucky that previous generations over built the infrastructure in the United States. The interstate highway system, started in the mid 50s, was way more capacity than we needed at that time and that excess capacity really provided room for economic growth in the many decades that followed. And the same with our Northeast Corridor railroad along the East Coast. I mean that system, which is admittedly very expensive to maintain, has lasted for over 100 years. So think about the billions of dollars it now costs us to keep it in good repair and expand capacity. Yes it's billions of dollars but it's billions of dollars spread out over the next 100 years. So that's making the case for it. I think we need to find better ways of financing it and spreading that cost over the many generations that will use the system for years to come.

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