

# **Martin Gottlieb: Hope keeps chugging along for train advocates in Ohio**

**By Martin Gottlieb, Commentary**

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A bridge collapses in Minnesota, suggesting that the infrastructure for carrying cars might be overstrained. Not only that, but a study comes out showing that people are wasting more and more time and gasoline in traffic jams.

And there's global warming. And there's war in the Mideast, where the oil is. And gasoline is \$80 a barrel.

OK, now are you convinced that Ohio needs a passenger rail system?

Maybe not. Truth is, some of us have always wanted a train system. We're just using recent events as sales devices, given our inability to make the sale in past years. You might sense that.

However, before you decide on the merits, take a ride in the quiet car of the Amtrak train linking Boston, New York and Washington. The quiet car is the one at the end of some trains; cell phones are prohibited there, along with loud conversations. The car, which can be entered at no extra cost, is the best place in the transportation world. So peaceful, so lulling. There's only that semi-hypnotic sound the train itself makes.

When you board it, you might have a plan to get some serious reading done. But you'll probably get too mellow and end up spending a lot of time just staring at the passing scenery. The scenery is ugly, but that just makes it all the more fun to pass.

Or you might be lulled to sleep. Whatever happens to you when you are blissful will happen. If you want to know what bliss is like, go to Washington.

If, however, you are one of those cell-phone people, there are plenty of cars for you, too. In them, you can indulge your hobby in good conscience, knowing that the offendable passengers are elsewhere.

There's also likely to be a club car. When the time comes to stretch your legs, you can get sandwiches, salads and snacks. And, coolest of all, you can eat in a car that is set up with tables at which people can face each other while eating, as the scenery passes at their side. It's like taking a train to 1938.

When you come back — via some unblissful mode — we can talk about Ohio.

As you know if you are old enough, Ohio is always, always, always being urged by somebody to re-embrace the train age, and is always resisting. Nothing ever happens except talk and studies.

This is largely because some people worry about the cost of passenger-train systems. Specifically, you hear horror numbers about their costs per passenger-mile. Pish-posh (a term you bring back from 1938).

Look at the debates about new subway systems. Such systems are always projected to cost monstrous amounts of money. And the real costs always end up making the projections look absurdly naive. Nevertheless, once built, a new system becomes central to the very make-up of the city. The value becomes incalculable.

OK, now that we have disposed of the cost issue, let's move on.

So there's this Ohio Rail Development Commission. It has finished a big new report saying that Ohio should have a new high-speed rail system and should connect to a larger regional one. The commission envisions lots and lots of riders and says the system would more than pay for itself when you figure saved time, energy and whatnot.

Good enough for me.

For Dayton specifically, the report has both good and bad news. The big project that the commission envisions would connect the three Cs — Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati — but would do so via Dayton and Springfield, not Interstate 71. That's good. (Trying to find a good use for an interstate is just throwing good money after bad.)

The bad: The study looks at a Columbus-to-Chicago possibility. The commission concludes that a route through Lima and Fort Wayne would be faster than one through Dayton and Indianapolis, and would generate more passengers.

The commission does like the idea of the Dayton route — largely because most passengers aren't going from one end of the route to the other, but are taking shorter trips. But the report comes pretty close to granting that the northern route should be a higher priority.

That's a worry for another day.

For now, the issue is simply this: How do we get the quiet car to Ohio, so we can lull everybody into a blissful — and optimistic — frame of mind. Once we've done that, this ought to be an easy sell.

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