

Editorial:

## **Transportation remix**

*Nation needs to consider public's changing attitude about travel preferences*

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The nation's transportation networks aren't entirely in step with travelers' needs and tastes.

The collapse of an interstate-highway bridge Aug. 1 in Minneapolis was symptomatic of an excessive focus on building roads and bridges at the expense of necessary maintenance. As airlines suffered from a plague of repeated delays, particularly during the busy summer vacation season, ridership on Amtrak's passenger trains increased. And an express bus service to Indianapolis and Chicago from Columbus that failed to catch on last year and soon was canceled has started up again, this time with a measure of success.

Congress and the president, as they consider federal subsidies for various modes of transportation and their infrastructure, have a duty to analyze whether the spending priorities of 10 years ago, before the terrorist attacks of 9/11, should remain in the same order. The systems that Americans used most often to travel from here to there in the last 30 to 40 years of the 20th Century might not be their best choices for this century.

As Americans deal with yet another gasoline-price spike, the costs of overdependence on highways and the personal convenience of cars keep rising. Mass transportation, which spreads the expense over more people per vehicle, has become more appealing. On a per-passenger basis, trains use 20 percent less energy than planes and 27 percent less than cars.

The nation's passenger-train service soon will complete its fifth year in a row of record ridership, despite its worst on-time record since the 1970s. Airlines, too, appear likely to end the year with their worst on-time record, as calculated by the Federal Aviation Administration.

Marion C. Blakey, outgoing head of the FAA, said in September that if airlines don't figure out how to make their schedules reflect reality, the agency next year could impose limits on the numbers of flights using exceptionally crowded airways, particularly on the East Coast.

Robert A. Sturgell, who replaced Blakey as acting administrator, has said that delays in air service are costing the national economy \$15.3 billion per year.

At least two retired chief executive officers of airlines, Robert Crandall of AMR Corp., parent of American Airlines, and Gordon Bethune, of Continental Airlines, say improved train service is the way to relieve congestion in crowded airways.

In Europe and Japan, travelers avoid the inconvenience of airports for middle-distance trips, zipping along in trains approaching 200 mph. With the exception of Amtrak's Acela line on the East Coast, however, most American trains average highway speeds.

Most of Amtrak's delays are related to sharing the rails with freight trains, which also have experienced a rapid rise in business. Still, without some new money, Amtrak's outdated equipment and cars will prevent improvements and expansion in service. In many cases, Amtrak is unable to add cars, even in the face of increasing demand for seats.

A bipartisan bill to improve rail service, sponsored by Sens. Trent Lott, R-Miss., and Frank R. Lautenberg, D-N.J., would take a step toward meeting passengers' renewed interest in riding the rails. In some cases, states already have responded to these needs, paying or helping to pay for routes Amtrak otherwise couldn't afford to operate.

Federal subsidies over the past 30 years or more have favored air and highway travel while relegating passenger-train service to a side rail. Amtrak's federal funding has remained virtually flat; its annual subsidy was \$1.3 billion last year compared with federal funding of about \$34 billion for highways and more than \$14 billion for air travel. Even mass transit, primarily aimed at helping people get around within cities, drew about \$8 billion in federal money.

Jim Norton, president of the Railroad Passenger Association of Alabama, points out that the federal subsidies of other forms of transportation in just one year exceed the total subsidies Amtrak has received in all the years since Congress created it in 1971.

As lawmakers continue their end-of-year scramble to finish work on spending bills for various modes of transportation, stopgap measures appear most likely to succeed. A House-passed bill, for example, would pay for the operations of the Federal Aviation Administration just through Dec. 31. This month, a House-Senate negotiating team approved a \$50.9 billion transportation bill that is unlikely to curry favor with President Bush. And the fate of a bill passed by the Senate in late October to provide \$11.4 billion to keep Amtrak running for six years is anyone's guess.

Instead of just stumbling along with temporary funding and make-do measures, Congress and the president should be designing long-term solutions that will ensure that America's people and businesses have efficient means of travel, regardless of their destination.

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