

By Brock Adams

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Nostalgia for the passenger train runs deep in America but it is more shadow than substance.

In its prime, the passenger train was a choice way to travel. Today, it is one choice among many, and not a popular one at that. Even if Amtrak's ridership tripled overnight, it would still serve only one intercity traveler in a hundred.

Yet proponents of rail passenger service argue that larger Federal subsidies, reduced fares and an extended route system will build ridership and ease the nation's energy problems.

Some have argued that Amtrak's primary purpose should be to reduce energy consumption, regardless of the size of its deficit or the cost to the general taxpayer. They consider my recommendations for restructuring the Amtrak system "contradictory" to the President's energy plan.

Others cite evidence that trains may not be as energy efficient as they are reputed to be.

I share with all Americans an appreciation for the intercity train and its importance to our society. I grew up with trains and, as a Congressman, helped pass the legislation that created Amtrak.

My recommendations in January for slimming down the Amtrak system were based not on emotion or memories but on an objective, exhaustive analysis of Amtrak ridership, economics and the impact of various levels of rail service on energy use. The inescapable conclusion is that we need Amtrak, but that we cannot afford it in its present form.

The present system has gained ridership by adding routes and service, not by winning travelers away from the car, plane, or bus. Certain routes are poorly traveled, with trains carrying as few as 25 passengers. As Amtrak costs have risen twice as fast as revenues, the Federally-funded deficit has tripled in six years, and the taxpayer is now putting up a dollar for every 59 cents the passenger pays toward operating costs.

The restructured system I have recommended would trim away the routes least used so that resources could be focused on the routes with the greatest ridership and the most promise. Trains would still serve 22 of the nation's 25 major population centers, 40 of our 50 largest cities and a total of 40 states.

In its new form the Amtrak system will provide genuine energy savings. In its current form it wastes energy. Depending on the number of locomotives, an intercity passenger train uses four to six gallons of fuel a mile. It must therefore carry more than 140 people to compete with the automobile for intercity fuel efficiency and over 400 to compete with the bus. Yet the average Amtrak train last year carried 128 passengers.

The trains to be discontinued averaged only 78 passengers on any given day in 1978, a rate of use far below the level at which even the most modest train can be considered energy or cost efficient. The trains being retained or consolidated represent the most widely-used, with the best prospects for increased ridership. The Administration is also proposing an increased investment in Northeast Corridor rail improvement, where most rail passenger service today is concentrated.

Since 1971 the Federal government -- the American taxpayers -- has invested more than \$3 billion in new equipment and better rail passenger service. During that time ridership has increased by 4.5 percent annually. Still, 99.7 percent of America's intercity travelers choose not to ride the train. We must question whether an expenditure of nearly \$6 billion over the next five years, which is what we estimate continued operation of the present energy-inefficient Amtrak system will cost the taxpayers, represents the wisest possible investment of public monies.

Given the proven public preference for the automobile, it seems more likely that the biggest payoff in energy conservation can be gained by making the motor vehicle more efficient. That is why we are working to increase ride-sharing, support enforcement of the 55 mph speed limit and redesign the post-1985 car to get mileage in the 40 to 50 mpg range.

Of course, any significant changes in the availability and price of gasoline could produce a shift in ridership. But because they serve such a small percentage of the intercity passenger market, trains could only play a minor role in an energy emergency.

If Amtrak's patronage were to triple -- an event that would tax its equipment to the limit -- it would still serve less than one intercity traveler in a hundred.

The restructuring will not leave a "bleeding stump" of a system. In pruning, the removal of unhealthy or redundant branches strengthens the tree and improves its chance of survival.

So it is with Amtrak. Our restructuring proposal is a life-saving operation. It is designed to preserve a national resource at a cost we can live with today and afford tomorrow.

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