

THE RAILROAD ADVANTAGE by Bob Grove, Chair, Railroad Task Force

The greed of investors, promoters, developers, and other vested interests should not be the driving force of our mountain lifestyle. Considering the current adequacy of our interstate highway system and the limitations of our economy, the construction of yet another interstate is not a rational consideration. But improving what's already in place – highways and railroads – is both rational and practical. The railroads provide the most affordable, efficient, and environmentally responsible way to move goods.

As of 2007 there were some two dozen freight railroads operating in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia on more than 10,000 miles of track, and carrying nearly 600 million tons of freight that year, often toxic and hazardous materials that would be too dangerous to face the traffic of interstates and other highways. They employed more than 140,000 workers whose wages and fringe benefits netted an average income of \$90,000 each.

Fuel efficiency and reduced pollution

On average, a freight train is more fuel efficient than a hybrid car, 3-6 times more fuel-efficient than a truck, and 3-12 times less air polluting than cars or trucks. One train can move the equivalent of some 280 truck trailers – the equivalent of 1100 automobiles -- averaging one ton of freight 436 miles on a gallon of fuel; that's three times as far as a truck, with one-third the pollution from nitrogen oxides and particulates.

Bulk commodities like coal and grain are even more efficiently transported – one train can transport the equivalent of 500 trucks.

Transportation accounts for 70 percent of our oil consumption and releases 28 percent of our greenhouse gas emissions; every ton-mile of freight moved by rail instead of a long-haul truck reduces those emissions by at least two-thirds. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) states that while U.S. trains move some 43% of intercity freight, they contribute only 0.7% of greenhouse gas emissions.

Thousands of new, energy-efficient locomotives are now in service, including hybrids and multi-engine "gensets." Intelligent computer-control systems adjust speed for weight and location to maximize fuel savings..

Slow-downs from critical traffic levels in major U.S. cities cost our economy \$78 billion a year in lost time and wasted fuel. A mere 1% increase in rail's current share of the freight market for one year would be equivalent to nearly 15 million trucks--about 600 million tons--reducing shippers' transportation costs by \$25 billion which, in turn, should yield consumer savings. Even now, if rail freight transport were transported by truck instead, consumers would see their annual costs nearly \$70 billion higher!

Shifting a mere 25% of truck traffic to rail would:

1. Significantly reduce highway congestion and travel time, thus improving safety;
2. Reduce 17 billion gallons of fuel consumption per year (79 gallons per driver);
3. Save drivers the equivalent time of an entire work week sitting in their cars;
4. Reduce air pollution by nearly one million tons per year.

The network is already here

The U.S. Department of Transportation, American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, and the Congressional Budget Office anticipate a 67% growth in the freight industry by 2020; rail freight is expected to double by 2035.

Most roads were not designed for today's heavy traffic loads, but rails were. New track can be laid faster, ten times cheaper, and far less destructively than building new highways, and maintenance is easier and cheaper as well, reducing the need for expensive highway maintenance and repair.

Intermodal trains already serve intercity truck distribution by transporting their trailers and containers. UPS is the number one rail customer in the U.S., with giant trucking companies like Schneider International and JB Hunt major customers as well.

Intermodal freight allows major railroad yards to off-load truck trailers and containers for truck distribution of goods to regional towns. New construction of additional spurs and short lines would help even more.

Freight shipments are not as time-sensitive as passenger transportation because products are not manufactured spontaneously; they are ordered according to shipping schedules. If you want something to arrive a day earlier, you order it a day earlier. And while trucks are skidding dangerously on icy highways, or struggle with navigating steep mountain roads, trains still move.

Can the trains presently take on new loads?

According to the Association of American Railroads as reported in the February 23, 2009 edition of the Wall Street Journal, the nation's five largest railroads have put more than 30% of their boxcars -- 206,000 in all -- into storage. Placed end-to-end, the cars would stretch from New York to Salt Lake City. Union Pacific would normally have 5,000 to 8,000 cars in storage; they presently have 48,000 idle cars.

Government Support

Just before his election, President Obama told the Nation Industrial Transportation League, "Rail is a highly efficient way to transport freight and relieve congestion on our highways. Rail modernization is central to a safer, more reliable, cleaner and more energy-efficient transportation future that helps address traffic problems and climate change. We cannot afford to wait on funding for updated infrastructure and technology to meet increasing passenger and freight demand."

The Freight Rail Infrastructure Capacity Expansion Act (H.R. 272) would provide a 25% tax incentive for investments by any business that would expand rail capacity, including new tracks, tunnels, bridges, and intermodal facilities. Every \$1 invested would generate \$3 economic output, with the expected \$1 billion economic output creating 20,000 jobs.

The Staggers Act of 1980 released the railroads from the former government-regulated stranglehold that placed 20% of them in bankruptcy. Since then, rail productivity, volume, and fuel efficiency have all climbed while rates have dropped 54%, allowing shippers to send twice as much for the same cost as they paid previously, saving consumers hundreds of billions of dollars.

Alarming, a proposed legislation (H.R. 2125/S. 953) in the 110th Congress would reverse the Staggers Act and re-impose government control of the railroads.

Railway infrastructure

The Rail Corridor Preservation Act gave the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) authority to purchase railroads and preserve rail corridors for "future rail use and interim compatible uses." Amendments to the Act declared it a public purpose for the NCDOT to reassemble critically-important, lost portions of rail corridors by condemnation. State and federal funds are available to assist short-line railroads make improvements to tracks and bridges.

In 1988, the NCDOT purchased the former Southern Railway's 67-mile Murphy Branch (part of which has since been purchased by the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad), setting the precedent for additional acquisitions. NCDOT now holds title to more than 100 miles of rail to be preserved for future use, and has restored 12 train stations at a cost of \$74 million to increase train service in the state. In the first decade of this effort, the number of train passengers to Charlotte annually went from 36,000 to 123,000, earning in 2007 a National Trust award for the state's forward-looking transportation policy.

Clearly, a destructive interstate is undesirable and unnecessary. Improvements to our present road infrastructure, complemented by the railways, will provide the freight transportation needs of the 21st Century.

NOTE: Statistics drawn from:

Association of American Railroads (AAR)

http://freightrailworks.org/media/AAR_LandPage_Factsheets_environment.pdf

Go21 7th Annual Congestion Relief Index

<http://www.go21.org/PolicyIssueContent/BottomLineReport.aspx>]

Go21 Public Affairs releases