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# Riding The Rails To Less Traffic Snarls

Neal Peirce



For a nightmare scenario of the world you drive in, imagine the year is 2020. The freight railroads of America are carrying close to the same volume of goods they do today -- about 14 billion tons yearly, with no adjustment for market expansion.

And what do you face when you head out on the road? Answer: More slowdowns, massively increased congestion. And most visible: Tens of millions more trucks -- many of them 18-wheel rigs with tons of cargo on board, filling up roadways, surrounding and frightening many auto drivers.

Here are actual projections of cumulative impact, 2000 to 2020, if freight railroads stall: About 900 million tons of freight will shift onto the roads; cost to shippers will rise \$326 billion; taxpayers will be charged \$21 billion to \$40 billion in extra highway and bridge upgrades; cost to highway users -- in travel time, accidents, operating costs -- will rise \$492 billion.

Do these figures come from the rail lines? *No!* They were put together by two highly regarded transportation consulting teams (Cambridge Systematics, Reebie Associates). And they're published by the group long considered the top voice for expanded road building in the United States -- the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO).

"We cannot afford for freight rail to carry any less than its current market share," says John Horsley, AASHTO's executive director. "Domestic freight will grow 60 to 100 percent in the next 20 years, and international freight will double or triple. Rail freight is vital to a balanced national transportation system."

Right now, Horsley notes, rail lines carry 16 percent of America's freight tonnage. Just to keep up that share, they need \$2.65 billion in capital investment they simply don't have.

So why can't the rail lines -- the Union Pacific, Burlington Northern Santa Fe, Norfolk Southern and others -- raise the capital themselves? They're already intensely capital-intensive, obliged to plow 18 percent of earnings back into improvements compared to 4 percent for average companies.

The freight-rail system was a triumph of 19th century America, opening up our heartland, freeing business and industry from the need to be near rivers or seaports. But highways and trucking, this time freeing shippers from a need to be near rail lines, eclipsed freight rail in the 21st century. With mergers and abandonments -- and the federal and state governments creating and

maintaining the competing new highway "roadbeds" – rail system mileage halved from 380,000 track miles in 1920 to 172,000 miles today.

In recent years the rail industry has upped its productivity and efficiency. It's "stable, productive and competitive enough," notes Horsley, "to profit and operate – but not to replenish its infrastructure quickly or grow rapidly."

And the rails are plagued with choke points that cry out for repair or replacement: antiquated bridges (some a century or more old), low-ceiling tunnels, highway crossings at grade, single line tracks without adequate sidings, and signal systems incapable of handling both high-speed passenger trains and slow-speed freight trains.

So AASHTO endorses a "public-policy-driven expansion" of the rail system – federal and state co-funding of upgrades that would clear the track for rail to maintain its current share of national freight, conceivably even increase it and relieve road congestion even more, pushed along by federal funding of as much as \$4.15 billion a year.

Of course, there's a limit to all generosity – first, says AASHTO, Congress must fund highway and transit at levels the organization believes necessary. The mega-reauthorization bill for transportation – "SAFETEA," now making its way through Congress – has dollar levels well below AASHTO's targets.

Another complication is that assistance for freight railroads quickly gets entangled with efforts to keep Amtrak rolling, or to help the 30 states interested in new high-speed rail corridors start moving their projects forward. Often – but clearly not always – track can be shared, but the critical issue is whose trains get priority. The just-passed Senate version of "SAFETEA" does include some authorizations to support freight and passenger rail investment by the states, plus a \$2 billion annual authorization for Amtrak.

A big related issue: the air industry (already heavily subsidized by federal taxpayers) has been cutting back sharply on service, especially to small and medium-sized cities. Result: More cars crowding roads to reach major hubs.

But rail *could* pick up much of the slack. Reconnecting America, a transportation advocacy group, notes that trips of 100 to 400 miles are the most effective market for rail service. It has ingenious ideas of turning airports into *travel ports* where rail, bus and urban transit would be added to today's mix of aviation, parking and rental cars.

The bottom line is clear: Whether for freight or passengers, we need to invest seriously to once again make rail a major part of our national transportation system. If we don't, our future may be one great snarled traffic mess.

Neal Peirce's e-mail address is [nrp@citistates.com](mailto:nrp@citistates.com).

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