

Amtrak at 50: High-speed rail merits greater attention

May 6, 2021

Last week, to mark Amtrak's 50th year, President Joe Biden visited Philadelphia's 30th Street Station to talk about U.S. passenger rail's "bright" future with high-speed passenger rail. His proposed infrastructure legislation, the American Jobs Plan, commits \$80 billion for rail service, much of it toward Amtrak. As a longtime Amtrak passenger himself, the president recalled fondly how fast and convenient the Wilmington-to-D.C. run was for him during his years in the U.S. Senate, as he totaled 7,000 round trips and more than 1 million miles on the rail. The speech hit all the Biden notes: a nostalgic affection for the proven and familiar and some folksy cheerleading for good-paying jobs, for American-made products and for steering the nation toward a better course on climate change.

Naturally, it was panned by the usual naysayers: those who can't stomach transportation investment that doesn't go into roads and bridges, who don't prioritize protecting the environment, who expect passenger rail to "pay for itself" when highway and air transportation are far more heavily taxpayer subsidized, and are apparently blind to how successful high-speed rail has been worldwide. Recently, the Cato Institute scoffed at high-speed rail as "obsolete" technology and investing in it as the equivalent of pouring money into rotary phones and electric typewriters. And Republicans in Congress since the time of Ronald Reagan have attempted to "zero out" Amtrak's operating subsidies. The common complaint is that Northeast cities are the chief beneficiaries, but then, when there's an attempt to upgrade service in the South and Midwest, the critics are usually against that, too.

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In reality, passenger rail is an underappreciated mode of transportation that works just fine, but only if needed investments are made (and they generally haven't been in this country, which relies on infrastructure relics like Baltimore's 148-year-old B&P Tunnel). Tax dollars are crucial to all transportation systems, whether it's roads (for which state and local government spend a combined \$181 billion annually) or air travel (for which the federal government has extended \$58 billion in direct help to the airlines during the COVID-19 pandemic alone). Clearly, taxpayer handouts are in the eye of the beholder. Most Americans don't give much thought to how gas taxes, registration fees, driver's license fees and so on go primarily to building and repairing roads. But Amtrak's direct payment? It's a regular tug-of-war in Congress.

Baltimore knows a thing or two about passenger rail, as the birthplace of the Baltimore & Ohio, the nation's oldest railroad. Even today, Baltimore's Pennsylvania Station is the nation's eighth-busiest Amtrak station, and, just further down the Penn Line, BWI Station is ranked 12th despite the chronic underinvestment. What Baltimoreans long ago discovered is that if you want to get from Charm City to downtown New York City, Amtrak is by far your best bet. Faster, more comfortable, electrified Acela trains of the last two decades have made it even better. And Amtrak's ambitious plans for the Northeast Corridor are supposed to cut travel times in half by 2040. This is hardly pie-in-the-sky thinking. Existing high-speed trains in Japan, Europe and China already run at 220 miles per hour or faster, compared to Northeast Acela trains that may be capable of 150 mph but often travel less than half that speed because of restrictive track conditions.

What makes Amtrak investment especially attractive now is that it can help reduce greenhouse gas emissions. If the U.S. is to achieve a 50% reduction in emissions, as the Biden administration has promised, the transportation sector is going to have to provide a big chunk as it produces more than one-quarter of all U.S. emissions. Taking gas guzzlers off the road is a start, but where do the passengers go? Fuel-efficient vehicles and the various forms of public transit can help, but you can't get more energy efficient (or lower carbon emitting) than trains. Studies have shown that passenger trains have the lowest carbon footprint of all modes of travel with air transportation causing the biggest. Even electric vehicles can't compete with train travel, although they do come the closest (aside from people who walk onto ferries). Oh, and did we mention trains are also far safer than cars and trucks?

Finally, the last bit that makes passenger rail service especially exciting is that it delivers from city center to city center, not to remote suburban outposts, where airports are usually located. That creates a greater opportunity for downtown economic development, promoting smart growth instead of highway gridlock, walkable and bike-friendly communities instead of carving up more farm land for costly sprawl development. President Biden isn't looking backward; he's got a bead on the future with truly sustainable, greener transportation. All aboard.