

## John Hood's Daily Journal



### Out of Town on a Rail

By John Hood

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RALEIGH – When I studied news writing at the UNC-Chapel Hill journalism school, we learned the usual “inverted pyramid” style in which you put the most important information in the first paragraph, the next-most-important information in the second paragraph, and so on.

Judging by the criteria of the inverted pyramid, then, the most important information in this recent McClatchy Newspapers [piece](#) about enhanced Amtrak service from Charlotte to Raleigh is that “John Robertson of Morrisville, a Wells Fargo Bank executive, likes taking the train for regular business trips to Charlotte.”

That wasn’t the reporter’s intention, of course. He used an anecdotal lede, a handy journalistic device for drawing a reader into a story by putting a name and face on it. But as it turns out, you can learn a great deal about the issue of intercity passenger rail in North Carolina just by reading that first sentence.

You see, there is no significant public demand for faster rail service from Charlotte to Greensboro to Raleigh. There is no significant public demand for faster rail service from North Carolina cities to points south (e.g. Atlanta) or north (e.g. Washington). So why have North Carolina politicians been spending millions of tax dollars subsidizing Amtrak service over the past 20 years, and why are so many politicians so excited about grabbing hundreds of millions of “free” federal dollars to enhance Amtrak service?

Because the few people who do regularly make use of intercity passenger rail tend to work for places like Wells Fargo Bank. They are bankers, utility executives, attorneys, or government officials. They work in downtowns and have business to transact in other downtowns. For them, embarking on a train in one downtown and disembarking in another downtown may make sense. For virtually every one else who needs to make intercity trips – for business or pleasure – it makes no sense at all. That, not the time spent in transit, is the reason why Amtrak will never appeal to most travelers as a transportation option.

That’s why the vast majority, well over 90 percent, of such trips are made by automobile. You can leave from your home, travel and stop at your discretion, and arrive in your desired city with the further ability to travel to your exact destination. Train service can’t do that.

If, on the other hand, what you really need is to get to a faraway city as rapidly as possible, and plan to use foot, taxi, or public transit when you get there, you’re probably going to want to fly. Even the somewhat-faster Amtrak service the Obama administration envisions for North Carolina and other cities will only be competitive with air travel for relatively short trips. Few will ride the train from Charlotte to Baltimore rather than fly no matter how much you straighten the rail lines and streamline the rail stops.

There are more detailed and sophisticated arguments to be made about the administration's pie-in-the-dirt \$8 billion Amtrak fantasies. Cato Institute scholar Randal O'Toole has [summarized](#) some of them in [a recent John Locke Foundation paper](#) looking specifically at the proposed "high-speed rail" – but which is meant "not-as-slow-speed rail" – from Charlotte to Raleigh. It's a foolish and costly idea no matter how you look at it.

But it helps to look at it from the vantage point of a Wells Fargo banker who already takes the train. Undoubtedly, he'd love the possibility of shortening his (lonely) trip considerably, as long as he doesn't have to pay the cost. Undoubtedly, a few other professionals, with average household incomes above the North Carolina average, might be induced to join him for an occasional intercity trip.

And, undoubtedly, if average taxpayers in North Carolinians ever get the straight story on what this is all about, they'll run the politicians responsible out of town on a rail.

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