

Romney should talk to the real people who use Amtrak

Mark Guydish

Commentary

1:39 am by: *Mark Guydish*

MITT ROMNEY has attacked Amtrak subsidies the way a cow's tail swats flies: An inborn reflex that requires zero thought. My question: Has Romney ever ridden Amtrak?

If he had, he might have met the people my wife and I encountered en route to Flagstaff, Ariz., and back to hike the Grand Canyon (photos and some more info will be forthcoming on my blog).

Romney could have run into the woman on the platform at Syracuse, N.Y., heading to Mesa, Ariz., for her daughter's 40th birthday. One reason to take the train: She could carry a lot - including more than a few ounces of liquid - not allowed on airlines.

Or he may have chatted with the charming lady from Melbourne, Australia who was returning to California for a flight home after visiting her son in Ames, Iowa. Taking a train let her "just see America" while avoiding yet more time in an airplane.

We had supper on the train with Robert and his daughter Cheryl from the Reading area. A Korean War vet, Robert uses trains frequently, often to visit Florida.

On our return trip, we breakfasted with Renee, a long-time Los Angeles psychotherapist who had relocated to Santa Fe and was returning there after visiting Los Angeles friends. She said she routinely uses Amtrak between Santa Fe and LA.

We ate breakfast with two Bostonians offering this opinion of their former governor. "It was like he wasn't even there," the husband said. "He was always out politicking, running for president."

The reason people take trains? Like us, they find it relaxing. The travel becomes part of the vacation, not a journey to it. As the Boston husband said, "The best part is watching the countryside change."

Of course, there are other reasons, like the woman we met on a prior trip who said her sister died in **plane** crash, prompting this personal conviction: "I will never get on an airplane again."

But by all means, cut Amtrak subsidies without talking to Amtrak riders, without investigating what it is, exactly, you will help or hurt, without pondering the wisdom of maintaining a strong third leg in the transportation tripod of auto, plane and train. Remember when 9/11 grounded planes across the country?

And the savings are astronomical, by which I mean, astronomically small. Federal Amtrak subsidies run about \$1.5 billion a year. In a \$3.5 trillion federal budget, that's a cut of 0.043 percent. Drop Amtrak subsidies for about 1,000 years and you'll save enough to pay for one-year of current deficit spending. Debt problem solved!

Granted, the perennial conservative cow-tail swat at Amtrak can sound compelling; a particularly strong argument was made in a Cato Institute paper in 2010 (I'll post links to all cited material on my blog). Of course, Cato also argues for privatizing road construction and maintenance.

The argument always boils down to cost-per-passenger mile. A common calculation: Tax dollars subsidize Amtrak to the tune of 24 cents per passenger mile, compared to 2 cents for driving.

How you do the math matters, though. An October 2011 blog by "David C." on greaterwashington.org counters that subsidized costs go far beyond direct payments from the feds. Tax money also covers the cost of coping with air pollution, subsidized parking, resource consumption, crash damage, land use and noise. "C" suggests Amtrak's total subsidies are 44 cents per passenger mile compared to 45 cents for a car.

Another hidden cost of cars: A recent study estimated time and fuel wasted in traffic congestion costs \$78.2 billion a year.

If we're going to discuss cutting Amtrak subsidies, we should actually *discuss* it, not toss it out with a flippant indifference to facts, as Romney did in January. "Look" he told supporters, "Amtrak ought to stand on its own feet or its own wheels or whatever you'd say."

Trains use wheels, Mr. Romney, and they carry real people. Try talking to a few.

