

Foreword

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Ohioans have talked about high-speed passenger rail service for nearly 30 years, but the progress in developing such a system has been slow.

Why? In part it is a consequence of the high cost associated with the development of high-speed passenger rail systems, which has led many policy makers to conclude that this business can best be handled by the private sector. Other explanations can be found in public doubts about the ability of intercity rapid rail systems to attract choosy travelers. And for some, the notion of fast trains and improved railbeds is little more than choo-choo nostalgia.

Yet, there's a more powerful explanation for why high-speed rail hasn't attracted more attention during the past quarter century. Very simply, Ohio's initial vision of an intrastate passenger rail system that connected Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati – a 3-C corridor that would compete with the automobile for ridership and alleviate congestion by removing vehicles from I-71 – was seriously flawed.

The erroneous assumptions embedded in this vision were quickly confirmed. They ran counter to an Ohio economy that was tied to the steel, automobile assembly and supply industries. They ignored the reality that the automobile is the most convenient and economical mode of transportation for most citizens. And they fostered false expectations that passenger trains would somehow reduce the need for constructing new highways, improving airports and expanding air travel.

But understanding the limitations of Ohio's original passenger rail initiatives doesn't justify abandoning the effort. To the contrary, the state's economy is still dependent on an efficient and fluid multi-modal transportation system. And high-speed rail has a vital niche in any transportation network designed to accommodate the increasing movement of people and products at the local, regional, national and international levels. That niche concentrates on the medium-distance travel market – too far to drive and too short to fly.

Today, Ohio's passenger rail efforts have a new vision – one that is focused on a rapid rail system that increases the capacity and fluidity of our regional transportation corridors for movement of both people and freight. This new vision looks far beyond Ohio's borders to examine the corridors where our citizens travel and it sees intercity rapid rail passenger trains as a means of augmenting and complimenting the continued growth of existing highway and air systems.

Recognizing that in Continental Europe, a vast network of high-speed train systems has nearly eliminated air trips between cities less than 400 miles apart, Ohio's new vision of high-speed rail is aimed at the three to four hour total time frame – an intercity market where rail transportation can add capacity and be time-competitive with air and auto for travel in the approximate range of 200 to 400 miles.

This mileage and time frame is one of the most inadequately served markets in Ohio and our region by commuter airlines because of the lack of service and the inability to quickly access airports and board planes. An intercity rapid rail system could overcome this impediment by boarding passengers in both urban and suburban stops, which include Ohio's major airports.

This mileage and time frame also reflects that Ohio has no full-service international air hubs. The Ohio & Lake Erie Regional Rail - Ohio Hub System is designed to link the regional international air hubs of Detroit, Toronto, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati and Chicago with the urban areas of Ohio. Our linkage to the Chicago international air hub will be achieved through the combined Cleveland-Chicago corridor of the proposed Midwest Regional Rail system.

The development of these networks will keep automobile trips best suited for rail off the highways, expanding their capacity for truck trips that must move over the road. Critically, it also will make the reach, pricing and frequency of all nearby international hubs available to almost all Ohioans. This rail linkage provides the best chance for the expansion of direct international flights from airports such as Dayton, Columbus, Toledo and Cleveland by dramatically expanding their catchment areas. And if our vision is realized, this rail-driven linkage of international air hubs will improve Ohio's position as a global business location, just as it will enhance the competitive cost of regional intercity travel.

How are we going to pay the capital costs of this kind of passenger rail service? For starters, there is the existing public/private partnership that is already funding the grade separation program on Ohio's rail corridors. This partnership, which includes state and local governments as well as private railroads, can be leveraged with federal monies to begin Ohio's intercity rapid rail development programs and provide an additional return on our grade separation investment to the state's taxpayers.

Beyond capital and maintenance costs, the development of a high-speed passenger rail system will involve additional costs associated with securing access to private property for public purposes. These costs will be substantial, which is why the state of Ohio will have to work closely with the private railroads to develop appropriate and realistic benefits for gaining public access and use of their private property.

While the feasibility study reflected in this report shows that revenue can be expected to exceed operating costs, we would be less than forthright if we did not acknowledge that there are situational variables in each corridor – particularly with those that involve any start-up ventures – that must be studied in greater detail. In addition, there are substantial “unknowns” in emerging federal passenger rail development programs, some of which center around Amtrak's ultimate role and funding structures, at the publication of this document.

Our view, however, is that this study provides enough positive operating information to warrant moving forward to the next steps in the process. It also is important to note that our proposed corridors are shared corridors with private railroad companies. It is anticipated that there will be further mergers and rationalization of the system in the near future. Therefore, it is imperative that we move quickly to identify and preserve the necessary corridors and specific rights-of-way needed to build a high-speed passenger rail system in the near future when demand, capacity and market forces warrant it.

For this reason, the Ohio Rail Development Commission recommends that the next steps recommended in this study be taken and that we proceed now to complete the first four steps in the Ohio Department of Transportation's fourteen-step project development process.

Highways, airways, railways and waterways must work in concert to connect Ohio and the region to the global economy. And as the globalization of our economy continues, it is imperative for Ohio's multi-modal corridors to increase capacity and fluidity to handle the ever increasing movement of freight and people.