

\$4.00 GAS: Where are the RAILS?

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Once again the sky is falling! Oil is currently well north of \$100 per barrel, and gasoline at the pump seems headed for \$4.00 again, perhaps higher by summer. Motorists complain, truckers strain, commercial aviation feels the pain, and our recovering national economy is once again stressed at a most inopportune time. So where are the rails? Well, Amtrak is packing them in, but it does not currently serve enough markets, or serve enough of them well, to make a big difference. Commuter rail is booming, but Chairman Mica (architect of the recent failed national surface transportation bill in Congress) wants to throw transit to the wolves. Freight rails advertise 400 miles-per-ton of freight on only one gallon of diesel. That's a bit aggressive for most truck cargo, but the rails do have an advantage. Why do we make poor energy and transportation choices? Short answer: We haven't tried very hard at the policy level! Too many sacred cows in the political path.

To anyone observing the current madness that regrettably characterizes the run-up to our November, 2012 presidential election, the answer is all too clear. We are in a state of paralysis. House Speaker John Boehner can't even get another short-term "Roads" bill through Congress, much less advance a comprehensive, long-term, surface transportation bill. We should be moving to include intercity passenger and freight rail as full-fledged participants in federal transportation policy and funding. This is not entirely the fault of the politicians. The public -- which generally has little interest in transportation -- is thought to be unwilling to support policy steps and the funding sources that will be required to maintain what we already have, much less develop a true multi-modal transportation system to move cargo and people more efficiently. Few political observers see much hope of doing better, regardless of who occupies the White House, or controls the Congress. Politicians are terrified of telling the public the truth, that transportation, and other vital infrastructure is expensive and delay only increases the cost. There are better transportation options, and some of them involve greater reliance upon rail. Our Virginia situation is not much better. A day of reckoning may arrive sooner than later.

As for the private freight rails, they could be described as operating a late-19th century rail network, enhanced with 21st century technology. Our freight railroads are now well maintained, generally well run, and reasonably profitable, but the U. S. rail network has regressed, as result of years of retrenchment, to the point that it is about where it was on the eve of the 20th century. Positive steps are being taken, but it will take billions of private and public dollars to equip the rails -- both freight and passenger -- to provide the high-performance, energy-efficient, environmentally-friendly rail service that the nation needs, *on a scale that will move the modal market-share needle appreciably.*

The nation cannot indefinitely ignore the great potential of rail -- freight as well as passenger. While the Obama administration's HSR initiative has struggled, it was and is

a laudable beginning. The U.S. needs a bi-partisan rail agenda and program. #####