

The View from New Jersey Turnpike

by Richard L. Beadles

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Few things please an old railroader more than an Intermodal train with a hundred or more *domestic* cargo containers and highway trailers in tow. That's not typical. Mostly we see port traffic on rail -- also bracing to us old-timers -- but that's easier done than the domestic part of the business. However, even the "domestic", as with our automobiles, is often composed of *international* stuff as well, that being the nature of manufacturing today. By the way, some say U.S. manufacturing is coming back.

Although this writer has driven the New Jersey Turnpike many times, I had never until very recently traveled that busy highway as a passenger on a bus. Leaving the driving to someone else, and from a higher viewing platform, I saw what I already knew was there, hundreds of millions of square feet of "logistics" centers (perhaps forty times that number in more-important *cubic* feet) through which retail consumer items desired by the vast Northeast population flow. One wonders if any of this merchandise finds its way to such centers via rail Intermodal ("IM")? Probably not much, and even less likely that any goes out via IM, given the nearby proximity of the NY Port and the consumers.

By chance, I recently saw what purports to be a summary of a *draft* of a Federal Railroad Administration ("FRA") vision for freight rail, with a stated goal of shifting up to half of all highway freight to rail over the decades ahead. One wonders if the draftsmen -- undoubtedly consultants to FRA -- have any idea of how the world really works? As one with rail in his blood, this writer would love to believe that rail IM, as we currently know it, can eventually move the needle several clicks, or more, in a shift of modal market share from highway to rail. But there are huge obstacles positioned in the path of any such dream. It comes down to flexibility, speed, convenience and cost. Each one of these is a serious impediment; each a story in and of themselves. Each such obstacle to rail is arguably a benefit delivered to those who use highways transportation by the public sector (FHWA, VDOT, et. al.) as a matter of traditional public policy.

Hopefully, public transportation policy will evolve over time in a more balanced way. Things are already beginning to change in Virginia. If you have not heard Thelma Drake, Director of the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, tell the Virginia story, you ought to invite her to do so.

Ultimately, the feds and the states must address rail freight promotion and development by the public sector as enthusiastically and supportively as some states, such as Virginia, have done with passenger rail. However, any serious effort by the FRA, and the several states, to formulate a National Rail Plan will need to focus on competitive economics, rail operations, and urban sprawl. A major transformation in rail IM will

require more than just the infrastructure, important though that is. At least somebody is thinking about it, and that's progress.

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