

# Transportation Fantasy Land

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A certain strain of the political right has of late sought to discredit the Obama administration's vision of an expanded role for passenger rail in America as a 1950's nostalgia trip back in time. They fail to acknowledge that there are several layers to the Administration's plans for rail, including investment in freight rail and considerable shared infrastructure development, which is greatly needed, regardless. In many cases, but certainly not all, appropriately utilized rail, is less costly, more energy efficient, and more environmentally friendly than highway and aviation transportation alternatives.

If the critics of "*Obama-Rail*" were really concerned about the future of transportation in the U.S.A., they would take an objective look at our 1956-era highway transportation model, which seems to have about exhausted its potential for affordable economic benefit. Our federal-state partnership in highway development and maintenance is falling short in the radically-changed world of 2011. Arguably, visions of perpetuating the road-building model of the 1950's are no less nostalgic than some of the potentially-misguided applications of rail. Consider some of the findings of a recent Congressional Budget Office assessment of the highway situation, together with supporting Federal Highway Administration ("FHWA") information.

Since 1980, national highway route miles have increased about 5%, lane miles a bit over 7%, and vehicle-miles-traveled, 100%. Does this sound like a healthy trend?

About 25% of the nation's highways, which carry about 85% of all road traffic, are paid for *in part* by federal user-taxes, but such taxes do not yield enough revenue to support the current level of federal highway spending. Since 2008, more than \$30 Billion of federal *general fund* revenue has been required to supplement road taxes.

FHWA estimates that to maintain the current level of highway utility, would require a 50% increase in current funding levels, which are now in excess of revenues.

Automobiles and buses account for more than 90% of all vehicle-miles-traveled, and are the major contributors to urban congestion, thus requiring costly lane-mile expansion, yet we permit anyone to drive anywhere, anytime, without regard for the demand-cost imposed upon the system. Easy solutions are still politically unpalatable.

Trucks account for the other 10% of mileage. They have been found to be responsible for almost all of the pavement damage. Depending upon truck weight, number of axels, etc., FHWA and the CBO estimate that the cost of truck-related pavement damage ranges from 5 to 55 cents per mile—a huge public subsidy.

This reminds one of the old story of the merchant who lost a bit on every sale but reconciled himself to that reality with the dream that he might make it up on volume! It's time to take transportation seriously, including rail -- even passenger rail!

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