

Transportation and Tea Party Politics – II

by Richard L. Beadles

Volume III, No. 16. August 15, 2011

Amtrak, High Speed Rail, and Light Rail, all seem to have disproportionately seized the minds of Tea Party critics of public spending. That is certainly the impression one gets from some of the actions, and public comments, of governors in Wisconsin, Florida and Ohio, relative to HSR. One presumes that the Tea Party folks fault these particular transportation options because of the sponsorship role of "big government", the magnitude of infrastructure investment, and the familiar pejorative, operating subsidy.

If substantial federal spending cuts in transportation occur, rail categories are sure to suffer. Even more revealing, and shocking, will be the impact of spending cuts in highway, aviation, urban transit, and waterway-related categories. Such cuts could have severe negative impacts upon both domestic and international transport infrastructure and services. In the process, the public may learn, to the surprise of some, that transportation is not cheap, that the true cost of road and air, in particular, have been hidden for years. Our system of so-called user fees falls far short of paying for 100% of what we expect in transportation. When, and if, a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of modal investment options is ever done - to include reasonably-defined externalities -- some of America's traditional transportation "success stories" may score poorly. We have never done this sort of even-handed, hard-nosed, analysis as a prerequisite to making transportation policy and funding decisions. Tea Party-driven austerity may inadvertently be positive.

America's privately-owned freight railroads are, as they appropriately remind us, a great asset and resource. They have been doing quite well financially -- so much so that some of them are beginning to develop a bit of a corporate swagger, with adverse implications for public-private collaboration. These roads are capable of playing an even larger role in moving U. S. cargo, both domestic and international, but they are ultimately constrained by the limits of their radically-downsized rail route systems (in contrast with the ubiquitous and ever-expanding highway network). Rail is also vulnerable in terms of its near-total dependence upon our already-congested highway system for intermodal originations and terminations. As for intercity passenger -- which arguably presents the greatest traffic growth opportunity within the rail mode (compare freight rail cargo movement statistics vs. Amtrak passengers for the years 2007-2011) - an equitable mechanism for resolution of public sector access, cost sharing, and liability issues, has yet to be devised. This should be a priority in the next U. S. Surface Transportation bill.

There is great need for public access to basic transportation information, such as might appear in an annual report to citizens. Ideally, all modes should be included, with operating statistics, sources and application of public funds, energy and environmental impacts, and future development plans and options. Rail would be a good place to start. The general public may occasionally be overly optimistic concerning the capabilities of rail, yet rail is often

underestimated in its potential. Our system of government depends upon an informed citizenry. Otherwise, the public may default on its citizenship obligation. Transportation is right up there with health, education and jobs.
