

Providence Journal

Editorial: Ramping up region's rail

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The Northeast Corridor could be its own country. The densely populated mega-region extends from Boston to Washington, D.C. It is home to 55 million people and a \$2 trillion economy. Were it a country, it would have the fifth-largest economy in the world.

This is an ideal location for a world-class public-transportation system. But with a few exceptions (such as some of Amtrak's service, especially the Acela), the passenger experience is not very good. Beyond the mediocre aesthetics, many passengers traveling to or from small cities and large towns find the connections to be chaotic, when they exist at all.

An extraordinary new proposal treats this region as a whole, ignoring state lines and the separate rail bureaucracies. The Northeast Corridor Infrastructure Master Plan is a blueprint for bringing Northeast travel into the 21st Century. What once looked like a wish list may now become reality, thanks to the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 and the economic-stimulus legislation passed in 2009.

The Northeast Corridor, which stretches from Virginia to Maine, and includes 12 states plus the District of Columbia, has many millions of rail passengers a year riding on Amtrak and the region's state-supervised commuter lines. Now states are looking beyond their fiefdoms to cooperate on creating an expanded and upgraded infrastructure to serve the entire region.

For example, the Rhode Island Department of Transportation and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority are partnering to extend commuter rail service from Providence to T.F. Green Airport and Wickford. The hope is to someday reach Kingston and Westerly.

Connecticut, Massachusetts and Vermont are working on a fully electrified commuter service to allow seamless travel from towns and cities along the Connecticut River to Boston. The MBTA is extending Boston commuter service to New Bedford and Fall River. Massachusetts also seeks to build a modern "Inland Corridor" intercity service to Framingham, Worcester and Springfield.

What this does — in addition to making rail travel a pleasure — is to bring poor urban cores into the vibrant New York-Boston orbit. This is about economic development.

Much would also happen to the south of us. The Long Island Rail Road would finally link to Manhattan's Grand Central Station, and a majestic Daniel Patrick Moynihan Station would replace the shabby Penn Station. Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland would collaborate to create new rail corridors for the Pocono Mountains and the Delmarva Peninsula. And hourly service would connect Washington with Newport News, Richmond and some other cities in Virginia.

Commuter rail serves as a natural form of zoning. The new and refurbished stations would become the focus for centralized and linear real-estate development and discourage urban sprawl. (In car-oriented Texas, new town centers are spouting up around stops on Dallas's new light-rail system.) Those who don't travel by train will also enjoy the results: cleaner air and less road congestion.

With these plans in place, ridership in the Northeast Corridor is expected to grow 59 percent between now and 2030. Judging by the crowded trains of today's inadequate systems, this number would seem

quite reachable.

The Master Plan projects are estimated to cost \$53 billion over the next 20 years. This would represent an economic stimulus by making construction and related jobs. But more importantly, it would provide a permanent stimulus to one of the world's great economic regions by making doing business within that region faster, easier and pleasanter.

A world-class rail system for the Northeast is long overdue.

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