

A PROJECT TO REBUILD AMERICA

By Rich Sampson

Nearly 20 editions ago, in our sixth issue of *RAIL Magazine*, we profiled the efforts of rail leaders and public officials in the Southeastern United States to establish a high-speed rail corridor stretching from Washington, D.C. to Atlanta, Ga. and Jacksonville, Fla. through the Carolinas. At that time, David Foster, manager of the corridor project for the North Carolina Department of Transportation, explained that their work in planning an eventual high-speed rail corridor was beneficial – even though no sources of investment were then available – because the project, “would be in a good position to utilize funds and be at the head of the line when they’re available.”

As we’ve met and communicated with passenger rail experts, observers, professionals and leaders over the 25 editions that now comprise the *RAIL Magazine* catalogue, sentiments similar to Foster’s have regularly emerged: that if a significant and reliable source of investment were ever secured, there would be

ample opportunities and energy ready to deploy high-speed and intercity rail projects. In short, many states and communities were gearing up for a future where passenger rail would be a key component in an intermodal surface transportation network.

On Nov. 4, 2008, the future of high-speed rail in the United States changed in two substantial and obvious ways, producing investments to support intercity rail projects across the nation. First, California voters approved Proposition 1A, authorizing more than \$9 billion in bonds to support a high-speed rail network stretching from San Francisco and Sacramento through the San Joaquin valley to Los Angeles and ultimately San Diego. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Barack Obama and Joe Biden were elected as President and Vice President. Just a few months into their new administration, Obama and Biden secured \$8 billion in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of

2009 (ARRA) – which was approved by Congress in early February 2009 – to support new high-speed and intercity passenger rail projects. The legislation marked the first time federal investment would be targeted to intercity passenger rail projects since the creation of Amtrak in 1971, and possibly the most important federal involvement in railroading since Abraham Lincoln signed legislation creating the Transcontinental Railroad in 1862.

(For full details on the passenger rail projects selected for investment through ARRA, please see our exclusive analysis in RAIL #25 or www.railmagazine.org – ed)

With initial investment established by both the federal government and the nation’s most populated state, passenger rail has clearly emerged as a new priority in our collective conscience as a much-needed and powerful tool to shape and connect our communities, drive economic growth and introduced new and more environmentally-responsible

travel alternatives. How new passenger rail projects – both high-speed and more conventional services – are integrated into our communities, transportation networks and ways of living will mark its ultimate influence. Accordingly, a comprehensive and innovative vision for a national passenger rail network is needed, one that recognizes that passenger rail is more than the type of engines or railcars racing down the track, or even the fine stations and depots that become our community living rooms. Indeed, as our publication's motto proudly asserts, rail is a means of connecting communities by moving people.

The Right Fit

When considering high-speed and intercity passenger rail in the United States, it is easy to fall into a comparative dismissal of efforts here when contrasted with how these services operate elsewhere. Observers

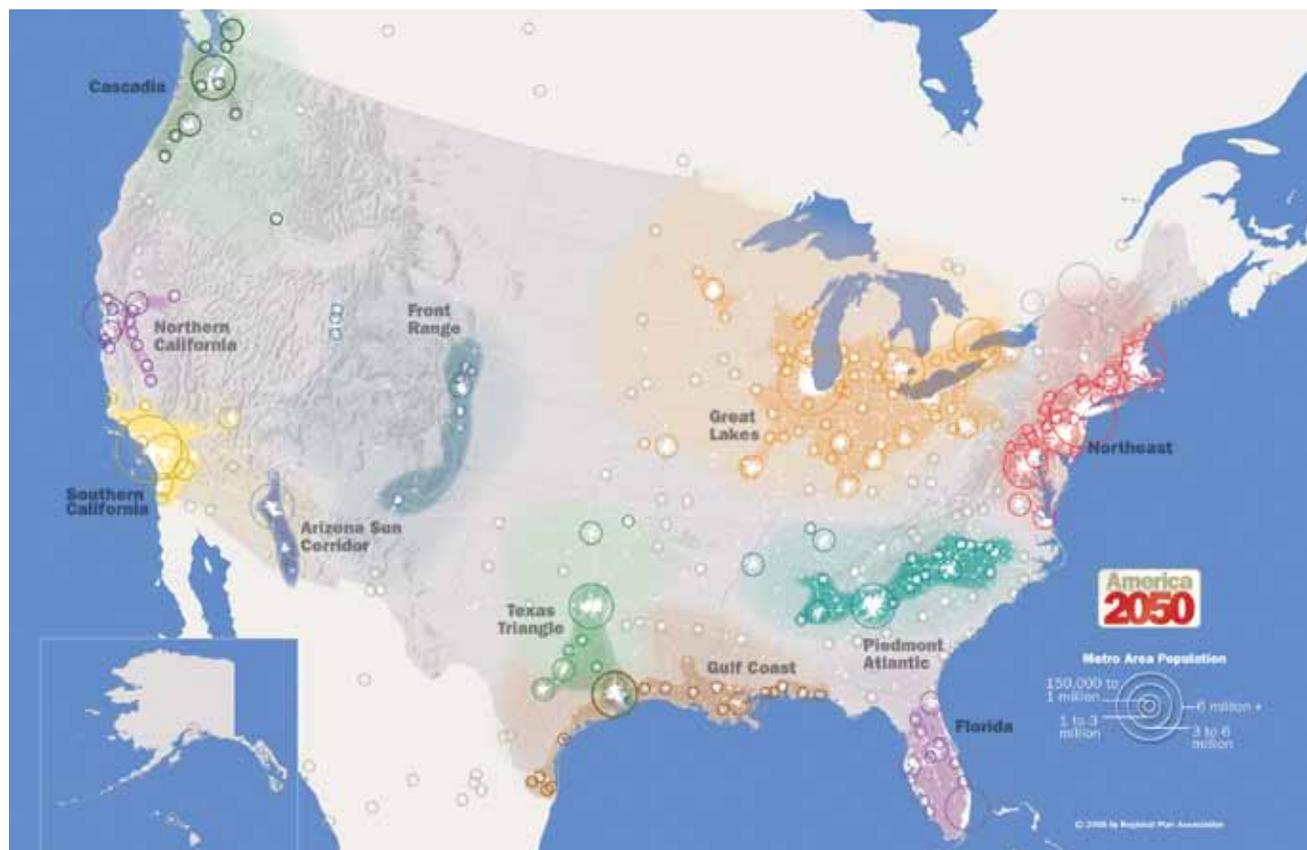
will often point to France, Germany or Japan and note how these nations have built and operated the fastest trains in the world for several decades. Or perhaps they will describe the rapid progress nations such as Spain and China are making in installing high-speed networks. And by measure of rough comparison, these nations are indeed further along in their work to link their cities and communities with fast and frequent intercity rail service, and leaders and citizens in those countries should be commended for their foresight.

However, such a relativistic perspective is shortsighted, as our nation is exceptional in the truest sense of the word, in that we are a collection of states, regions and communities with differences that are uncommon to the same degree anywhere else. As a result, while other countries can boast how their high-speed and intercity rail networks serve large swaths of their populations, hardly any of them would need to

span multiple mountain ranges, deserts, great lakes, frozen tundra and sweeping prairies in order to connect one end of their nation to the other. Meanwhile, the differences in how people live in one area of the United States can fluctuate greatly from many others, as – for example – communities in the Pacific Northwest have different priorities than those in the Southeast. Those differences are real and important, and as such, focusing on a passenger rail system that serves the entire nation in the same manner would be unresponsive and inefficient. Instead, passenger rail projects should consider the needs and habits of the regions and communities they serve, and then establish connections between regions where they intersect.

Indeed, the model for how such varying concepts for high-speed and intercity rail networks could interact is already established in the form of our contemporary passenger rail services. The *Downeaster*, supported by

High-speed and intercity passenger rail in the United States can be effective if tailored to serve regional corridors, such as those designed on this map by America 2050.





The high-speed rail corridors designed by the U.S. Department of Transportation respond to the regional identities of the nation.

investment from the states of Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts, would never be confused with trains like the *Pacific Surfliner* in California, the *Heartland Flyer* in Oklahoma and Texas, or even the *Acela Express* higher-speed train along the Northeast Corridor. Each service reflects the identity and needs of the region it serves, as business executives and Broadway-bound travelers mix on the *Acela*, while passengers toting surfboards to the beaches of San Clemente befit the *Pacific Surfliner's* moniker. Thus, inasmuch as the *TGV* is a fitting representation of the French identity, or the *Shinkansen* a hallmark of Japanese achievement, such a unifying national rail service and experience is not appropriate here.

“One of the things we’re trying not to do is create a cookie cutter, where everything is exactly the same,” says Karen Rae, Deputy Administrator of the Federal Railway Administration. “It really needs to be designed around the local and state needs.”

What will ensure the long-term success for high-speed and intercity passenger rail projects in the United States are the benefits they offer to riders. And those attributes are not quite as simple as attractive vehicles and reasonable trip times, although those aspects are prerequisites for any viable transportation option. Elements such as connectivity to the larger transportation network, sufficient frequency of operations, and above all, reliability combine to produce rail services that can link communities together and attract riders frustrated by increasing congestion on our nation’s highways and tarmacs.

Connecting Communities

The motto of this publication – and our Passenger Rail Symposium – is *Connecting Communities by Moving People*. It’s a concept that reflects the identify of passenger rail in all its modes and forms in North America, and also serves as the

guidepost for where high-speed and intercity rail should be headed in the near and long-term future. Beyond a collection of railroad tracks, vehicles or stations, the fundamental business of passenger rail is linking people with destinations and enlivening and enhancing the communities and neighborhoods it serves.

Of course, the work of operating trains across infrastructure to reach cities and communities along their routes is the center of efforts to better link regions together. Projects supported by public investment – whether federal, state, regional or local – should improve trip time, service reliability and frequency of operations as their core mission. Most of the high-speed and intercity rail projects selected by the Obama Administration for ARRA investment focused on these activities. However, in order to make these projects successful over decades and even centuries of service, additional and more subtle elements are required than faster trains, better infrastructure

and new and improved stations.

Indeed, an authority no less than President Obama himself described a broader vision for high-speed and intercity passenger rail when he announced his administration's approach by saying, "what we're talking about is a vision for high-speed rail in America. Imagine boarding a train in the center of a city. No racing to an airport and across a terminal, no delays, no sitting on the tarmac, no lost luggage, no taking off your shoes. Imagine whisking through towns at speeds over 100 miles an hour, walking only a few steps to public transportation, and ending up just blocks from your destination. Imagine what a great project that would be to rebuild America."

The President's depiction of the effort as a "project...to rebuild America," is one that recognizes that elements such as connectivity, economic development and regional cohesiveness are just as crucial as the fundamental railroading aspects of vehicles, tracks and facilities. Providing connections to the larger transportation network – especially public and community transportation – is perhaps the most urgent of these. Over the last half-century, a growing realization of the need for, and benefits of, responsive and efficient transit options in communities of all sizes has been underway across the country. Public investment and policies have reflected these evolving priorities. The opportunities presented by new investment in high-speed and intercity passenger rail must leverage this existing commitment to transit by focusing on projects that include easy and convenient links to local mobility options, whether those are a nearby subway line in a large city or a community van service in a smaller town.

"We're focused on multimodal transportation," says Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio. Tampa is likely to be the initial terminus of the first true high-speed rail project to open in the nation, which is expected to connect to

Orlando at speeds of up to 188 miles per hour by 2014."

Yes, rail is involved. But it's not just trains," says Iorio. "Our local system is needed no matter what. But now it's going to be part of a much larger transportation system."

Critics of both high-speed and intercity passenger rail and public transportation describe such a vision as a fantasy, one more in-tune with the thinking of dense cities in Europe or Asia. However, such a perspective denies the recent efforts of many American communities to cultivate multi- and inter-modal connectivity at their transportation nexuses. One vibrant example of such a project can even be found through one of the communities positioned on a planned high-speed rail line: Sacramento, Calif.

Certainly no mega metropolis, California's capital city has focused its multimodal activities at its Sacramento Valley Station in the heart of the city's downtown. The historic and well-appointed facility – originally built by the Southern Pacific in 1925 – functions as Sacramento's defining transportation location, already connecting four different intercity passenger trains – the *California Zephyr*, *Capitol Corridor*, *Coast Starlight* and *San Joaquinis* – with the light-rail trains and local buses of Sacramento Regional Transit, Amtrak California's intercity and regional bus service and taxi stands, along with well-designated and maintained bicycle and pedes-

Sacramento's Valley Station already links local light-rail and bus service with intercity passenger rail, which all are calling at the station at the same time in this photo.

trian paths. Moreover, the city's very walkable downtown and historic Old Sacramento district can be reached within minutes from the Station. The facility seems very much in keeping with the vision outlined by President, except for one key element: it is already occurring.

Rebuilding Our Economy...By Rail

Billions of dollars of investment in high-speed and intercity passenger rail were included in the ARRA legislation – an economic stimulus bill – to help get Americans back to work by building railcars, constructing infrastructure and staffing eventual rail services as locomotive engineers, station managers and maintenance personnel. Not only will these direct benefits of the selected projects help advance our nation's economic recovery, but also the connectivity and improved mobility offered by greater intercity connections facilitate other economic development activity. This comes as no surprise to any regular observer of the passenger rail renaissance of the last few decades.

Rail facilities and infrastructure have always been one of the first and foremost drivers of economic activity throughout our nation's history, along with our waterways and ports. From the growth of our largest cities to the very reason for inception of small towns and villages, railroads produce significant and lasting economic returns. Recently, local and regional rail transit proj-



ects have found developers willing to partner with new and revitalized services to cultivate rail-oriented development locations offering a dynamic mix of retail businesses, commercial space and residential locations driven by the ability of people to reach these districts via nearby rail stations.

These same opportunities exist to leverage investment in high-speed and intercity rail projects with rail-oriented development efforts as they do with local and regional transit. Due to the high ridership levels projected for these projects, their stations will be concentrated centers of activity, with thousands of passengers traversing their halls, platforms and adjacent neighborhoods every day. This produces a captive audience for not only useful products and services offered by retailers, but an opportunity to lure businesses looking for convenient access to travel modes and residential dwellers looking to live near areas of activity and excitement. When these assets are enhanced by easy connections to public transportation and regional bus and rail routes, or even to airports, the benefits of rail-oriented development projects are only more greatly compounded.

“We view the area around Milwaukee’s planned intermodal station as a development opportunity and as an area that is susceptible to change,” says Richard Marcoux, commissioner of Milwaukee’s Department of City Development. Milwaukee is currently served by Amtrak’s *Hiawatha* corridor trains and will soon host intercity trains to Madison supported by ARRA investment. “With the added traffic from high speed rail, our planned streetcar and commuter rail to Racine and Kenosha, you set the stage for true transit-oriented development.”

Looking once again to Sacramento’s Valley Station, economic development opportunities can expand the potential of an already vital multimodal facility. Land that used to support the Southern Pacific’s extensive yards and shops now lies fallow, waiting for not only a high-speed rail terminal just north of the current



Sacramento’s Railyards redevelopment project will transform the former Southern Pacific yards and shops (above) into a dynamic urban district via easy rail connections (below).



train platforms, but also efforts to transform the former yards into one of the nation’s largest rail-oriented development projects. While work is just beginning, the Railyards project is expected to transform the Southern Pacific’s Central Shops building into a public marketplace, offer expanded space for the Railroad Museum, include more than 12,000 housing units and create 19,000 jobs. Projected to include at least \$5 billion in private investment, the project will span some 240 acres and last well into the next decade.

“This plan reflects the community’s vision for this historic property,” said Suheil J. Totah, vice president of development for Thomas Enterprises, which now owns the property for the Railyards project. “We will integrate

the existing downtown to a vibrant new neighborhood of mixed-use, high-density housing with retail and entertainment venues and we’ll have a transportation hub, offices, open space and cultural offerings. We are committed to working with the community and local government leaders in a public private partnership to make The Railyards a dynamic, regional destination.”

A Vision Emerges

As communities around the nation prepare for the coming arrival of high-speed trains and new or improved intercity projects, a growing perspective is emerging on the best and right way to ensure these services are not merely a new travel

toy designed to operate at higher speeds, but rather a project to rebuild America. Through the combination of projects selected and designed to meet the needs of their communities and regions, vital connections to the larger transportation network and leveraging investment to spur rail-oriented development, a broader vision for a national passenger rail network is indeed possible. With leadership offered by elected officials at all levels of government to secure investment, innovative ideas and concepts by rail planners and developers, and dedicated work by transportation professionals to implement projects, that vision will be achieved.

“This is a real vision about how to not only transform this country generally, but transform our transportation system in a fundamental way,” said Vice President Biden on the announcement of the effort’s inclusion in the ARRA legislation. “It’s about time we took those railways and made them the national treasures they should be. They’re the best way to reconnect and connect communities to each other to move us all forward in the 21st century.”¹



Dedicated rights-of-way are crucial to achieve high-speed rail services.

About Fast Mail for Rail

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The Capitol Limited

News on federal passenger rail policy and developments from the Nation's Capitol

- Passenger Rail & Transit Receive \$17.7 Billion in American Recovery & Reinvestment Act** The new legislation provides the largest-ever single investment in rail transit and intercity rail.
- President Obama Voices Support for Passenger Rail Investment** At his recent Town Hall meeting in Fort Myers, Fla., the President enthusiastically supported passenger rail projects as a key facet of his economic stimulus effort.
- Analysis: Passenger Rail Investment in American Recovery & Reinvestment Act** Prepared by the National Corridors Initiative, this analysis considers the Amtrak, high-