

July 16, 2009

The Honorable George V. Voinovich
United States Senator
524 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: State and Federal Passenger Rail Policies

Dear Senator Voinovich,

I am writing to share with you some of my thoughts on the passenger rail planning initiative currently taking place in the State of Ohio and how it interfaces with passenger rail policy at the federal level.

Recently, several robust discussions in Ohio have led me to reflect upon the goal of instituting passenger rail service. For the record, I am a supporter of efforts to establish viable intercity passenger rail service, and would like nothing more than for these efforts to culminate in an unmitigated success. It is for this reason that I decided to write to you.

The benefits of establishing intercity passenger rail service are both considerable and timely. Rail would promote energy conservation, which would reduce our society's dependence on petroleum; and would lead to more compact and efficient land use, which would reduce the social, economic, and environmental problems associated with urban sprawl. It would also have the added benefit of providing a clean, comfortable, efficient, and safe transportation alternative for all of our residents, young and old alike.

As promising as this sounds, each one of these benefits is predicated upon a rail system that will attract a level of ridership sufficient enough to be competitive with the automobile. From a public policy standpoint, the real question is not: "What are the benefits of instituting passenger rail service?" The potential benefits are many, and are recognized by planners, elected officials, and the vast majority of citizens. The relevant public policy question is instead: "How do we create a competitive, viable, and sustainable rail system?" The answer to this question will determine the success or failure of the overall effort. I am concerned that the current answer at both the state and federal level is leading us toward failure.

My first area of concern has to do with passenger rail policy at the federal level. While I applaud the Obama administration for its progressive stance on rail, the fact of the matter is that in order for passenger rail to be truly successful, we need a modern-day version of the Interstate Highway Act for rail transportation.

One of my biggest critiques of the current federal vision for passenger rail is that it sells itself short. In essence, it focuses solely on nine disparate high speed rail corridors. In so doing it divides, rather than unites, the nation.

It does not include, for example, a connection between the Great Lakes region and the Northeast; nor does it include a connection between the Midwest and the South. A system that lacks such obvious interregional connections (to say nothing of the dozens of cities, such as Akron, not even served by one of these corridors) will not be a viable alternative to the automobile.

The reality of our current situation is this: We live in a society that is entirely dependent upon cars. It has taken us nearly 90 years to reach that point, but we have finally done it. If we are to reverse this trend, the impetus to do so must come from Washington, because the effort will require the overall vision, financial resources and incentives that only the federal government can provide. The Interstate Highway Act was a great example of this. A bottom-up, piecemeal approach to highway planning would have gotten us nowhere.

In order to make rail truly competitive, it will take a national debate and discussion, followed by a conscious and courageous policy shift designed to break our society's total dependence upon the automobile. A multi-faceted approach is needed. This approach should entail:

- Significant federal incentives for land use policy changes that would promote much higher development densities and mixed uses
- A complete restructuring of the federal highway program to focus solely on system preservation and safety (rather than congestion)
- A gradual, but significant, increase in the federal gasoline tax to provide incentives for rail and transit usage
- An "Interstate Rail Act" that would pledge to provide every urban area in the United States over 50,000 population with high-quality passenger rail service
- A corresponding level of federal investment in intracity transit service to augment intercity rail and serve shorter trips within each urbanized area

My second concern has to do with passenger rail policy within the State of Ohio. Again, I am grateful that Governor Strickland has breathed new life into rail planning efforts in Ohio, but I fear that passenger rail will never succeed in this state if we continue to do the same old things as far as land use and transportation are concerned.

Passenger rail service without complementary land use changes and public transportation improvements is a recipe for failure and "I told you so's" from the public. For land use planning to be truly effective, the primary goal has got to be to establish (or reestablish)

urban core areas. By effective, I mean land use policies and planning principles that will encourage rail and transit usage, such as much higher development densities, mixed uses, and limited parking. Rail service will be much more successful if we can get people living and working in our downtowns, inner cities, and towns.

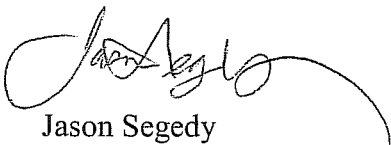
Major improvements to Ohio's public transportation systems are just as critical to the success of passenger rail as land use planning reforms. The plan for the "3-C" system, for example, to the best of my knowledge, does not even address issues like "How do I get from downtown Cleveland to Aurora?" or "How do I get from downtown Columbus to Dublin?" If people cannot get to their final destination without a car once they get off the train, the system will be of extremely limited use.

I understand the fiscal realities which necessitate an incremental approach to developing a rail system in Ohio, but I greatly fear that a philosophy of "We just need to get this started" will result in a hastily-designed rail system that, in the end, will set rail planning back.

In closing, I hope that you will take these ideas into consideration as you debate and discuss the merits of various passenger rail alternatives. I realize that many of the policies that I am advocating will be controversial and difficult to implement, and I know that I have offered more questions than answers. It will take wiser minds than mine to make the difficult political decisions to implement the public policies that will need to be in place for rail to truly compete with the automobile. But implement them we must; for the economic and environmental sustainability of our state and our nation.

If you would like to discuss these ideas further, please do not hesitate to call me. I would be glad to assist you in any way that I can.

Sincerely,



Jason Segedy
Director

cc: Fred Abousleman, NARC