



The Little Engine That Could

If We Needed Another Reason for Passenger Rail, Katrina Gave It

By Otis White

ATLANTA

WE'VE learned a lot about evacuating cities in recent days, much of it deeply troubling. But if the failures of New Orleans and the gridlock of Houston show anything, it's that we urgently need a third way out of cities, something other than flying or driving. Fortunately, there is such a way: passenger rail.

If local and federal authorities had worked with Amtrak to make better use of its trains in New Orleans, thousands could have been evacuated before the worst of Katrina hit. And if Houston had gone ahead with earlier proposals to develop high-speed rail links, the same might have been true there.

For decades, two myths have stymied efforts to develop intercity rail systems outside the Northeast: that rail can't compete with cars and airplanes and that the only region where passenger rail has been successful, the

Northeast, has unique characteristics. Both are wrong.

True, long-distance rail will never work as anything other than a tourist attraction. (And this is what Amtrak delivers in most parts of the country: long, slow, nostalgic, ultimately useless train trips.) But trains—and in particular high-speed services like Amtrak's Acela—work wonderfully for trips of 100 to 500 miles. These middle distances are too short for efficient air travel, where you spend more time in airports than in the air, and too long for comfortable auto



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travel. At these distances, rail passengers can travel downtown to downtown in about the time it takes to fly and catch a cab, and have a more comfortable, productive journey to boot.

But what about the Northeastern myth that rail works there only because of the spacing of the cities? Are there other big cities 100 to 500 miles apart? There are dozens of them. To name one pair, Houston and Dallas are 246 miles apart, about the same as New York to Washington or New York to Boston. Or Chicago and Detroit (279 miles); Eugene, Ore., and Seattle (310 miles); or Miami and Orlando (264 miles).

The challenge with passenger rail has always been its financing and management. On the one hand, high-speed rail requires big upfront investments: you have to retrofit tracks for 125-mile-an-hour trains, build stations and buy locomotives and cars, investments that are seen as too great for private enterprise. On the other hand, the Amtrak experience shows that governments usually don't run good railroads. The answer, then, is a public-private partnership, with federal and state governments

paying upfront costs and helping private companies buy the trains, and private companies running the routes and maintaining the equipment from that point forward.

So why hasn't this happened already? Because, as with so many other things in government, it was hard to see the most tragic consequences of our inadequate and overwhelmed urban transportation systems until a crisis struck. Before Aug. 29, when Hurricane Katrina came ashore, most people knew only the annoyances of delayed flights and crowded highways. Now, thanks to the people left in New Orleans and those stuck on the roads outside Houston, we understand the dangers as well.

If the federal government needed another reason to support the development of modern, high-speed passenger rail, then here it is. Not only can it reduce congestion, save energy and strengthen regional economies, in times of emergency it could be a critical third way out.