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Indiana needs high-speed rail

During the last few years, many existing and new civic organizations have put forward plans to improve the socioeconomic climate in Indiana. In each instance, the ability to freely exchange ideas and capital, people and products by either

traditional means of travel or through the assistance of technology has been critical. Mobility is the key to sustaining Indiana's economic vitality, economic growth and quality of life.

How we travel to conduct our business must meet our historical tests of efficiency, economy and environmental impact, and now it must meet the added test of security. In this environment of heightened sensitivity to security in travel, as well as an economic climate in which a meaningful economic stimulus is required, a viable regional high-speed rail system holds many promising solutions.

Over 40 years ago, America embarked upon the interstate highway system, building 46,000 miles of multi-lane roads. The interstate system had dramatic impact on mobility, economic growth and transportation efficiency. But its development created problems we did not consider important at the time, including the devastation of many city centers and the decline of small towns hurt by route choices and pollution. By the 1970s, vehicle emissions represented the primary source of urban pollutants.

Today we have begun to focus on the impact of interstate development—the costs of pollution, energy waste, land disruption, accidents and time wasted in



VIEWPOINT

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traffic jams. Cities, towns and counties are paying for these road choices in law-enforcement costs, emergency-services costs, land lost to highway rights of way that subsequently go off the tax rolls, and pollution rules that drive industrial jobs out of urban counties.

In 1971, the federal government established the Airway Trust Fund, which, like the Highway Trust Fund of the 1950s, invested taxpayer dollars in airway-related infrastructure, such as aerial navigation systems and airports. Without these government-funded infrastructure programs, the development of faster, more efficient cars and airliners would have been impractical.

Since airline deregulation, our airports, like our highways, are unable to efficiently meet our basic transportation needs. Currently, our nation spends nearly \$80 billion per year on its highway infrastructure and \$19 billion on its aviation systems, not including the recent \$15 billion airline bailout. In spite of these massive investments, we are unable to keep up with ever-expanding demand. Highway delays across the largest metropolitan regions have nearly tripled since 1982 and flight delays have grown more than 33 percent in the last five years.

While these large expenditures in highway and aviation infrastructure must continue to adequately maintain our systems, further expansion of these modes is increasingly expensive and difficult. Regional, high-speed rail is part of the solution to congestion on the crossroads of America.

High-speed rail is an infrastructure that links major Midwestern metropolitan areas through passenger rail-service providers like Amtrak or other public or private operators. It would include building new rail lines and refurbishing old ones.

A regional high-speed rail system offers taxpayers cost-effective mobility and safety. Its creation and operation provide a short-term economic development stimulus and a long-term increase in efficiency, capacity and safety in travel.

Using 3,000 miles of existing rail rights of way and reaching speeds of up to 110 miles per hour, a regional rail system would offer reduced travel times, trains with leg room for passengers and the ability to use your cellular telephone and computer in comfort while traveling to your destination: activities not recommended if you are driving and not permitted when flying.

Regional rail would provide downtown-to-downtown connectivity and transportation choices for communities that do not have or are underserved by commercial air service. A functioning rail system would also provide transportation for those who do not or cannot drive.

Rail is more economical to build than other transportation systems. Interstate expansion typically costs more than \$10 million per mile, and faces route-specific and special-interest political activism. Airport development and expansion is a multi-billion-dollar project with congestion quickly overtaking the benefits. In contrast, the development of a regional high-speed rail system using existing rights of way costs just \$1 million per mile.

Trains are also much more energy-efficient than cars or planes. High-speed trains are three times as energy efficient as cars and nearly six times as efficient as planes. For example, a flight from New York to Chicago with 100 people on board uses about 1,500 gallons of

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fuel. A train with 1,000 people uses nearly 300 gallons of fuel. Interestingly, trains can run on time in rain, snow, wind and when it is sunny and pleasant.

A regional rail network should be part of our economic development plan where competitive prices, convenience and multiple travel options are attributes of our transportation system. Today, nearly 90 percent of all U.S. travel is by automobile, 6 percent by plane, 2.5 percent by buses and commuter rail and 1.5 percent by Amtrak. Still, Amtrak is the seventh-largest carrier of passengers in the United States.

The car remains most competitive economically for short commutes. Air travel is most competitive over long distances. An appropriately structured regional rail

system would be competitive for trips of 100 to 500 miles. Today, nearly 50 percent of air travel is less than 500 miles and 25 percent is less than 100 miles. When one considers the time wasted in activities required to get to the airplane for a short flight, everything from paying above market rates for parking for the privilege of being an airline customer to increased, but necessary, security delays, it is readily apparent that a more efficient mode of transportation is required.

The construction of a nine-state Midwestern rail system would cost about \$4.5 billion. Nearly 15,000 construction jobs would be created to build it, and nearly 2,000 people would be employed to keep it operational. Such a system is projected to break even in three years and be profitable in 10.

The benefits of such a system include reduced travel time, improved service reliability, an expanded regional travel service, improved passenger and freight train safety, and the creation of another virtuous cycle of development opportunities. The development of such a system offers clear benefits to Indiana's current manufacturing giants like Cummins, Bethlehem Steel, Inland Steel and our Amtrak repair facility in Beech Grove.

In difficult economic conditions, we must continue to evaluate and pursue sensible public-policy initiatives that provide meaningful improvements to our community. The development of a regional rail system is one public-policy objective Indiana taxpayers and elected officials should consider. •

Williams is a member of IBJ's Corporate Opinion Board.