

New railroading era?

The echoing hoot of a midnight train, whistling down the thousand miles of night — few images capture American essence as that, speaking of wanderlust, promising possibility, hinting at great things happening in far-off places. The old trains touched a collective chord in the American character. One hundred and fifty years ago, if a town wanted its piece of the American Dream — which mainly meant the pursuit of commercial happiness — it needed the railroad. Political machinations to get a line through this or that backwater burg were rampant. It took a lot of wheeling and dealing even to get the narrow gauge to Bridgton, 125 years ago. Physics and engineering doomed the prosperous town of Paris Hill, trapping it in amber as South Paris prospered with its new line. These stories were repeated westward across the country, and once East met West in Utah in 1869, the golden era of railroading was ushered in, and it lasted over half a century. Fortunes were made and the country was built, and then the time of the great trains passed. Gradually, trucks took over many of the freight routes, airplanes carried the long distance routes and cars took everyday travelers away from the rails. The past half century has seen retrenchments and closings. Railroads now seem largely a part of some romantic past, a golden era when anything was possible and things got done. The past is gone. It's the Twenty-First Century. Time to don our personal jet-packs and fly into the future, right?

Hold on. Why are the civic and business leaders of the Saco Valley talking about reviving the old Mountain Division line? Have they been smitten by some Disney-fied version of the American past, one that maybe never was, and certainly can never be again? No. Theirs is a clearer-eyed hope than all that. The railroads can once again be the engine of economic prosperity. And the potential is there in the Saco Valley. Romantic ideals have little to do with it; this is about the bottom line.

The State of Maine was smarter than states usually are when it bought the closed rail line of the Mountain Division of the Portland Ogdensburg Railroad for a million bucks in 1987. The price was a bargain and a half — but only if the state uses the line sometime. And it might cost a million dollars a mile to refurbish the train line and get it up and running and crewed, Portland to Conway. And millions more could be spent, and millions lost in operating the thing. Then, why are people thinking it's such a deal?

Spinoffs, secondary assets. Public transportation is heavily subsidized. Trucking companies are subsidized by the billions spent each year on highways. Airlines are directly subsidized. In Europe, public transportation is run directly by the government, at a "loss." Why all the resources for transportation? Because it's basic support for any economy. Trains and planes and trucks move the people and move the goods; modern commerce would be impossible without sophisticated and integrated and well-supported transportation systems. The Mountain Division railroad would have to be subsidized too, just as others are. The state owns the Mountain Division already, and the DOT is charged with it, and a private operator would run it. The spinoff, for the Saco Valley directly, and western Maine in general, would be spectacular, however. Millions of dollars for businesses, many tens of millions in tourism dollars, better transportation options for thousands of people. Through intermodal hookups and a tie-in with the successful Downeaster on the Portland end and the large potential of the Conway Scenic Railroad on the New Hampshire end, railroading could come back, big time, in the valley of the Saco.

A renovated line, probably carrying passengers rather than freight, would serve a mix of commuters, morning and night, and tourists and visitors the rest of the time. Such a line might not show a direct profit, but the economic development potential for the Saco Valley is practically incalculable. Or it could be. Studies remain to get done, and if more energy goes into pushing forward the concept, one can be assured they will be. But studies only go so far. Know-how, political will and grit will be just as important as high concepts, grants and government bankrolls. A railroad for the Saco Valley may be an idea whose time has come.

A combination of forces are making the idea look smarter and smarter. The price of fuel is driving people toward public transportation that does not yet exist. That which does exist, like the Downeaster train, could connect directly to any revived Mountain Division line. The cruise ship industry is growing and Portland is building a big terminal for the big boats. And remember, the state already owns the line. Yes, it may take a million dollars a mile to refurbish it, but that's cheap, relatively — the Gorham bypass will cost \$20 million, and that's just three miles of highway.

Conway already exists as a destination point, and a tie-in would be mutually beneficial to both Maine and New Hampshire. Maine already has its successful railway models, too, though a Mountain Division feeder line would have to forge its own identity. The short line St. Lawrence & Atlantic, running through Auburn, has been an American success story, carrying freight and distributing from and to the West Coast, with Vancouver at the terminus. The Downeaster is America's most successful new Amtrak passenger line.

Facts are facts. It's a fact that America spends disproportionately more on its highways than on its railroads — in a recent year, \$31 billion for highway funds, one billion for trains. It's a fact that railroads are more efficient people-movers than a fleet of private cars. Many kinds of freight can move much more cheaply over the rail than over highways — and wear and tear on deteriorating highways would be saved, too. It's also a fact that railroading has a certain romantic cachet, but that can be turned to a hard-eyed positive: just take a look at the success of "cute" excursion lines, like the Conway Scenic Railroad.

Can it work in Maine? Well, the Downeaster is only four years old and is already the most successful passenger route in America. Even disregarding the possibilities of intermodal transportation hookups with ships and cars and planes — rail-to-rail transfers could be a gold mine for the Saco Valley.

A lot remains to be done before any project even gets underway. It's now a gleam in the eyes of some — but they're an influential lot. Town and business leaders packed the Standish town hall for a meeting on the railroad last week. Still, the legislature has to come around, DEP must be convinced, an operator would have to be found for the line, and equipment would have to be found, too. Eventually, the public must be convinced that the past, the present and the future can all be enhanced together with a rail line for the Saco Valley, running from Portland to Conway. The business and civic leaders of the Saco Valley will have to keep the energy and the commitment up for a few years. It will be hard work, and there's nothing romantic about that. No, wait, we take that back. Hard work and a dream, expended together, those made America. Why can't they remake the Saco Valley? — MTC