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Stimulus Funds for Rail

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In April, the Federal Railroad Administration must give Congress a stimulus spending plan for rail projects. While the federal stimulus package provides $8 billion for high-speed rail lines, it is centered exclusively on passenger rail. In Ohio, Gov. Ted Strickland has proposed a $250 million investment to resume the Cleveland-Columbus-Dayton-Cincinnati passenger rail service.

Getting cars off crowded highways is laudable and can reduce roadway congestion. But by focusing on passenger rail, Ohio could miss a historic opportunity to invest in our freight rail system. More so than passenger rail, investing in freight rail would be a good deal for our future and advance crucial priorities for the environment and economy.

The challenge with passenger rail goes beyond funding; it has to be a desirable alternative for Ohioans. Simply put, if Ohio builds it, will Ohioans come?

Potential passengers will have the option of a proposed once-a-day train service between city centers or hopping in their cars and driving on their own schedules. Trains will move faster than cars but stop in Columbus and Dayton between Cleveland and Cincinnati. As a result, rail travel will take longer than the four-hour drive from Cleveland to Cincinnati.

Once arriving, the next decision will be how to get around. Renting a car or hiring a taxi will mean additional expense and logistics. Local public transportation may not take travelers where they want to go in a timely, convenient fashion. I think that for many potential passengers, the inconvenience and expense of passenger rail may discourage its use — as our mixed history with Amtrak has indicated.

Even if passenger rail does reduce some highway traffic, freight transport will continue to be a major contributor both to roadway congestion and the cost of highway maintenance. The Federal Highway Administration says trucks are responsible for 40 percent of the cost to maintain and expand the nation’s roadways. Other research suggests that a truck causes 1,000 times more damage to a road than a personal automobile. The Federal Highway Administration reports the cost of road deterioration by trucks far exceeds far the tax revenue trucks generate. The result is that taxpayers at all levels subsidize truck operations.

As a nation, the last time we invested heavily in the rail infrastructure was in the in the 1800s. That investment created the basis for the best rail network in the world and opened the West to explosive growth and expansion. However, since we started a love affair with the automobile, voters have opted for more roads, and the trucking industry gets a free ride. Public funds have focused almost exclusively on road investment. Now, as we finally begin to consider rail options, we should think about growing both freight and passenger rail.

Investing in our freight rail system would be smart spending that would stimulate jobs now, reduce oil consumption, extend the life of existing roadways and help the environment. Freight rail programs have a better chance than passenger rail programs of achieving the benefits of diverting traffic from road to rail.

Although less visible and perhaps less fashionable than passenger rail, freight rail is alive and well. Privately owned, operated and maintained, the industry has grown steadily since deregulation in 1980, lowering costs and improving fuel usage and environmental impact. The benefits of rail are greatest for intercity transport; rail already moves 40 percent of this shipping, and it could do more.

Helping the rail system take a larger share of freight movement off our highways would pay huge public dividends. Similar to passenger rail, increasing freight rail capacity would protect the environment through reduced pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, decreased fuel consumption, improved highway safety and congestion, and in the long run, a lower tax burden on U.S. citizens.