

Friday, February 20, 2009

Letter to the editor by [Bruce Todd](#)

Rail worthy of investment

Rather than taking a plane or a limousine to the nation's capital for their inauguration, President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden arrived in Washington, D.C., by train. When he was a senator, Biden commuted regularly on Amtrak for more than three decades between his home in Delaware and his office in D.C.

While they have embraced the train as an effective mode of transportation, Obama and Biden also have embraced improving our nation's passenger and freight rail infrastructure. So have many Republicans on Capitol Hill. Nowhere is the need for that improvement more apparent than in Texas.

Texas has more miles of freight rail tracks than any other state. But our stressed freight rail network threatens to derail the Texas economy; some of our rail lines were built more than 130 years ago and need to be replaced, rerouted or upgraded. Clogged or insufficient freight rail lines are hindering the movement of goods, congesting roadway intersections in urban areas, and threatening population centers through spills and accidents. Moreover, in a state projected to double in population over the next two decades, too few cities in Texas are connected by regular, reliable passenger rail service.

We can't solve our transportation problems without making rail — both freight and passenger rail — a key component of the system. The current session of the Legislature is a good place to start.

Nearly four years ago, voters approved creating the Texas Rail Relocation and Improvement Fund. But state lawmakers have not yet acted on the public will by providing money for the fund.

Putting just \$200 million into the fund could generate \$2 billion in authority to issue bonds. This money would go a long way toward ensuring our state's rail infrastructure meets the needs of a 21st century economy.

To enhance our state's investment in rail, money from the Rail Relocation and Improvement Fund could be coupled with millions that will flow to Texas through the federal economic stimulus package.

However it is paid for, spending money on improving our state's rail infrastructure is a wise investment. Consider this data:

- It costs \$1 million to \$3 million per mile to add capacity to rail, compared with \$10 million or more per mile to add one lane to an urban highway, according to the Association of American Railroads.
- Every \$1 of investment in freight rail infrastructure generates more than \$3 in economic output, according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

If money is not allocated for the Rail Relocation and Improvement Fund, our state likely will fail to realize billions of dollars' worth of benefits from rail infrastructure improvements that are needed in communities small and large.

Bruce Todd is a local lobbyist and executive director of the Texas Rail Relocation and Improvement Association.