

Fast trains ahead? High speed rail still in planning, if not on tracks

North Carolina rail planners have long envisioned a day when state population growth, increased highway congestion and the soaring prices of motor fuels would make high-speed rail travel through this part of the South not only a desirable goal but an economic reality as well.

With estimates of the state's population exceeding 9 million, with interstate and primary highways tied up in frequent jams and the cost of unleaded gasoline often topping \$3, the need is plain. But the high-speed trains aren't running yet despite a big increase in demand for intercity passenger trains. Amtrak reports a 20 percent increase in ridership and revenue over the last five years, according to a new report focusing on the need for high-speed intercity service.

The Passenger Rail Working Group, comprising federal and state transportation officials, noted last month that much of North Carolina is right in the middle of one of 10 emerging national mega-regions where high-speed rail would be important. Calling the region the Piedmont Atlantic and embracing North Carolina's population centers, the report notes: "The low cost of living and high quality of life in the Southeast are two reason for this mega-regions's booming population, which is anchored by Atlanta but stretches east to Raleigh, North Carolina, and west to Birmingham, Alabama. The region is facing challenges associated with its growing population, such as increased traffic congestion, runaway land consumption, and inadequate infrastructure, which it hopes to address with sustainable solutions."

Yet the track necessary to carry high-speed trains from Washington to Charlotte is not intact. Trains magazine writer Bob Johnson notes it takes an hour longer to travel by rail from Virginia's capital to North Carolina's than it did 40 years ago because a 73-mile section of mainline track was removed, forcing a detour.

But, he went on, the plan is for high-speed trains one day to restore the direct link. "Spearheaded by investment from the states of North Carolina

and Virginia, the project is further along than any other in the U.S. that would launch trains running at speeds above 90 mph over new track built specially for such a service."

The goal, the magazine said, "is to extend the nation's sole island of high-speed rail beyond Amtrak's 457-mile Boston-Washington corridor about another 450 miles south to Charlotte, N.C. initially, linking the new line with existing rights-of-way that are being incrementally upgraded north of Richmond and south of Raleigh."

North Carolina has wisely preserved the rail corridor where high-speed tracks one day will be laid to carry faster trains and give travelers in the southeast a high-speed option like those available in the nation's northeast corridor. As the price of gasoline continues to rise and as tempers fray out on those costly interstate parking lots, potential riders everywhere must be sending a silent message: Hurry up!