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## **Talking trains**

### **Rail service, much criticized, still remains an important option on the table when it comes to transportation planning**

A Raleigh conference has spotlighted an exciting possibility -- a high-speed rail corridor from Washington to Raleigh and Charlotte and eventually to points south. Stops might include Spartanburg and Greenville, S.C., Macon and Atlanta, Ga. and Birmingham, Ala. The Women's Transportation Seminar hosted the confab Monday.

The beauty of the plan would be that this is a high-speed service, with trains going up to 110 miles per hour. One problem some travelers who have been lukewarm to trains have had is that "We can get there faster in our car." Not so with this service. And the relief that such service could bring to interstate highway travel is obvious. The notion is deserving of enthusiasm and practical support from the federal government. Getting the corridor ready, including the building of new rail lines and the reconstruction of older ones, would run about \$3.5 billion.

Congress tends to raise its eyebrows at such a figure, but foresight, and long sight, is needed. Gasoline is through the roof (this past weekend, premium gas was over \$3 a gallon again in some places) and that's a situation not likely to improve. Roads are only going to become more crowded.

It's important as well to take to heart the reminder offered by a state transportation official: No one is saying that such a rail service would turn the highways into vacant lots with tumbleweed blowing across them. The rail service would simply be part of the transportation network.

Here's another interesting piece of information reported at the conference. Despite the fact that train schedules are unfamiliar to many people, and that service from Amtrak is limited and that there are complaints about reliability, more than 567,000 people rode the train on average trips of 200 miles last year -- to and from destinations in North Carolina. For many people, in other words, train travel is appealing. A trip from the Raleigh area to Charlotte, for example, offers a lot less wear and tear than a three-hour car ride featuring the thrill show of Charlotte traffic.

With a bigger corridor open, plenty of attractive options would be possible -- from access to kinfolk in places where the traffic is too thick to drive to weekend jaunts to Washington for concerts or sightseeing, or even trips to Atlanta.

Car travel, after all, is pretty predictable. You turn the key, you make periodic stops to discipline the kids, you spend \$40 or \$50 or more for a tank of gas, and you arrive at your destination with a stiff back and the need for cleanser to get the chocolate stains off the upholstery.

On the train, you sit back and relax, and the purr of the rails is a tranquilizer. You arrive refreshed, and best of all, without the constant jittery feeling in the back of your mind about that long drive home. This is not something we want?