

Envisioning a Truly National Rail Network

The NARP position paper, "Modern Passenger Rail: A National Necessity," calls upon Congress and the Administration to create a vision of a high-quality national rail system connecting all regions of the country and serving all major transportation routes.

Just what that vision should be was left open to discussion for many reasons, one of which is NARP's lack of resources to collect and analyze the necessary data to make that determination. It is clear to many, however, that the current network is much too small.

The evolution of the national highway network provides an excellent model for the development of a national rail network. In 1921 the Federal Highway Administration established a research program designed to study the highway needs of the country. It resulted in Toll Roads and Free Roads, a master plan for a 26,700-mile network connecting the whole country, which was published in 1938 and revised and expanded in 1947.

Debate over funding this network continued for nearly a decade. There were several large issues such as funding mechanisms and labor issues that needed to be overcome. Funding proposals came and went; the process was stalled.

In 1956, the local highway plans of the states were added into the master plan. The plan was published in a simple book of maps entitled "The General Location of a System of Interstate Highways" and distributed to every congressional office. This was the catalyst that made overcoming the other issues possible. The Federal Highway Act of 1956 created the interstate system and authorized the highway trust fund with a grant of \$25 billion in general revenue funds.



26,700-mile highway network proposed in 1938



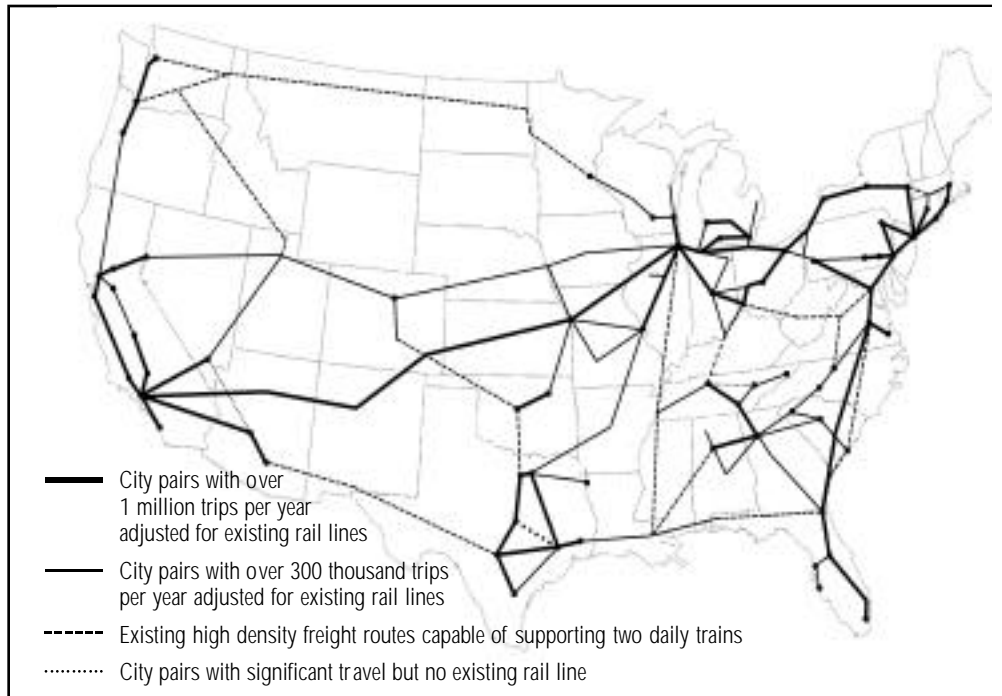
Current federal high-speed rail system plan

Comparing the original 1938 highway map with the federal government's current plans for a national high-speed rail system illustrates why rail has had a difficult time moving forward. Not only is their proposed system not politically viable, but it does not begin to serve the needs of the country. It also demonstrates a lack of confidence in rail's capabilities.

A truly national rail network can be envisioned using data from a travel survey conducted by the Bureau of Travel Statistics in 1995. By graphically representing high travel volumes on corridors between Metropolitan Statistical Areas

(MSAs) a much more comprehensive map begins to emerge. But even this map does not tell the whole story – one third of all travel happens between MSA's. It also does not account for the cumulative effect of intermediate travel within those corridors.

More quantitatively robust answers may be available soon. A new organization – Reconnecting America – has collected raw travel data from government sources and the aviation system. They have been analyzing this data in order to develop a vision for a comprehensive national rail system. The results should be available in Fall 2002.



U.S. travel patterns based on 1995 Bureau of Travel Statistics survey