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Subject: Re: Rick Scott sucks ass

Posted by [Nukelt15](#) on Sat, 12 Mar 2011 02:47:42 GMT

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All passenger rail in the US, aside from railfan excursions and other special events, has been dependent upon government funding since the 1970s. None of the Class I railroads (of which about half a dozen remain) have the infrastructure to take back control of passenger operations if Amtrak or any of the various regional commuter services (NJ Transit, SEPTA, etc) were defunded.

Here's the rub- government money is routinely used to prop up the airlines as well. Not as frequently, mind you, given the nature of the business, but it has happened several times and none of the major US air carriers would exist today if they hadn't been bailed out. In fact, not one form of mass transportation from buses to ferryboats operates entirely on revenue from fares.

Trouble is, unlike some other countries, the US is really really big and has lots of very dense population centers very far apart and has several centuries' worth of uninterrupted construction and development to work around. For the most part, existing rail networks can't be modified without extensive re-zoning and generous use of eminent domain powers. Existing track can be re-laid, but any increase in traffic creates congestion that really can't be alleviated without significant investments in time and money.

Worse, passenger rail in the US is further limited by the necessity of using the same routes as freight traffic. Few passenger-exclusive routes exist (the Northeast Corridor is one), and they were established long ago by railroads that have since merged and shifted to freight-exclusive operations. Amtrak must pay for trackage rights on the rest of their routes, as they are privately owned by the freight carriers. Many of the passenger routes were dismantled when the rise of air transportation caused the decline in passenger traffic which ultimately led to the Amtrak takeover of all long-distance passenger rail traffic... and Amtrak doesn't make enough money on existing routes to replace the lost routes.

All of the other trackage was built to handle heavy freight at low speeds (45mph or lower), and is thus unsuitable for high-speed passenger operations. Freight traffic puts a lot of wear on the rails, so even if all of the existing routes were 'upgraded' to permit high-speed passenger service the maintenance costs incurred to keep it that way would be astronomical. All of that money would have to come from somewhere- the Class I carriers won't pay for it because the existing tracks make them money just fine, and Amtrak hasn't got the funds to perform the initial upgrade let alone any further maintenance.

Compounding the problem, interstate truck traffic has long been a sap on the railroads' revenue in freight traffic. The interstate highways, by the way, are also publicly funded, as are the older US highways... and all roads everywhere, for that matter, and thus all transportation, period. Nobody remembers that.

I am a huge railfan and a huge proponent of passenger rail, but here in the US the damage is done and it won't be undone easily. While trains are still the most efficient way to move goods and people, they are not the most profitable and only freight traffic, able to move huge volumes at a time with more flexible schedules and lower overhead, can generate enough revenue to operate

independent of government aid.

Even that hasn't always been true; some of the existing Class I railroads were the result of federally-mandated mergers. The two eastern carriers, Norfolk Southern and CSX Transportation, are direct successors of Conrail, which was a government initiative, and before that several dozen railroads which would have collapsed without outside intervention. What is now Norfolk Southern trackage was at one point operated by three Class I railroads- Pennsylvania, New York Central, and New York, New Haven & Hartford... all three of which folded into the Penn Central Merger and only avoided complete dissolution because of government intervention via Conrail. Freight traffic recovered largely because of intermodal freight- containers and spine cars that carry truck trailers by rail... which allowed the railroads to recover some of the traffic they lost with the rise of interstate trucking.

Rising fuel costs have the potential to increase interest in passenger rail, and already have done so... but it will take a lot more than that to get over the massive costs of changing the existing infrastructure to support high-volume passenger traffic, let alone the cost of creating new infrastructure.

Sadly, you can expect any high-speed rail plans to stay on the drawing board for the foreseeable future... even in places where the physical space exists to build the infrastructure without massive changes to existing population centers.

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