

EDITORIAL

COMMON CARRIERS

ALTERNATIVE TO HIGH-SPEED RAIL



THE ANNUAL GLORY DAYS FESTIVAL on Saturday promises to be a colorful celebration of White River Junction's railroad past. We hope "Glory Days" will become the rallying cry for the region's railroad future. Who wouldn't like to hop on a train in White River Junction and travel more quickly, reliably and cheaply to Boston, Concord, New York or Montreal?

We know what you're thinking. Dream on, right? Well, the dream may not be impossible. The Obama administration has a vision of seven high-speed rail networks throughout the Northeast, including routes passing right through White River Junction on their way north to Burlington or south to either Boston or New York. So far, almost \$1.2 billion has been awarded in the Northeast region for high-speed rail projects and to improve Amtrak service.

Unfortunately, that's not nearly enough money to build the kind of expansive and efficient networks common in France, Spain, Japan and China. Nor will the current development plan affect service out of White River Junction any time soon — there are lots of obstacles, including the fact that there isn't any track left between here and Concord, where rails have given way to trails for cyclists and runners.

So is the Upper Valley supposed to wait patiently while the federal government helps to bring faster rail service to places like Brunswick, Maine, and possibly Burlington before ever coming close to White River Junction? Not necessarily, suggests railroad expert Charles H. White Jr. in a commentary that appears on this page. High-speed trains running along dedicated lines may be just the thing for densely populated routes such as the Northeast Corridor between Washington and Boston — but that's not the only way to run a railroad.

The U.S. government, White says, should join in a partnership with freight carriers to help them improve their infrastructure. In exchange, the private operators would provide passenger service along track now used mainly to move freight. In such a way, secondary rail markets such as those in New Hampshire and Vermont could end up with better train service. The line running between Rutland and Montpelier, for example, now used to haul freight, could also carry people.

Unlike much of Europe and Asia, this country has marginalized passenger trains. Geography and the allure of the automobile are among the reasons why. But U.S. policy is also to blame, White explains. In the 1970s, private rail carriers were struggling to stay solvent. One by one, the federal government and the courts absolved them of their legal obligation to provide adequate passenger service. In short, they were allowed to favor freight over people, who weren't climbing aboard in sufficient numbers.

To address the passenger-rail problem, Congress created the federally subsidized Amtrak service. But Amtrak did not replace regional passenger carriers, which all but disappeared. Meanwhile, the freight carriers consolidated and thrived. Now they, too, require upgrades to their infrastructure, and they, too, would like federal assistance to do so.

There's no reason for the federal government to move along parallel tracks, so to speak — one for passenger rail and one for freight, each in competition with the other for limited taxpayer funds. Instead, freight and passenger services should share the same new and improved infrastructure, with the exception of a few dedicated high-speed corridors. White would also like to see Amtrak transferred from government control to the collective ownership and control of the private railroads.

As much as we'd like to see high-speed trains come our way, White's idea makes a lot of sense and deserves wider circulation. On Monday, President Obama announced his intention to pour more money into rail improvements. If private railroads seek federal help, then they ought to fulfill their common-carrier obligation and once again take on passengers.