

How can we have better passenger rail service in the U.S.?

1. Invest public money in rail infrastructure



Why is there a 'No Trespassing: Private Property' sign at the railroad crossing?

The railroad companies will tell you that it's because it's dangerous to walk (or bicycle, or drive) on the railroad tracks.

Of course it is, but it's also dangerous to walk or bicycle on the freeway, and yet you don't see any 'No Trespassing' signs on the freeway, do you? That's because the freeway is owned (and

maintained) by the public, with tax dollars. It is a **public** right of way.

The rails, however, are **privately** owned (as the sign says). The rails and the land they sit on belong to individual railroad companies, whose primary goal is profit, not the public good.

Private property can only be maintained and improved when the owner can afford to do so, when they have enough money. Publicly owned assets, though, can be maintained through both good and bad economic times; indeed, economic downturns trigger government spending to stimulate the economy.

More than a century and a half of private ownership of rail infrastructure has resulted in inadequate rail capacity in the United States. That's why passenger trains are so often late; the rails are congested.

This distinction between trains and other modes of transportation does not exist in other industrialized countries (except Canada and Australia, which also have inadequate passenger rail service); in European and Asian countries, the rails, just like the roads, airports, and harbors, are public property, acquired, developed, signaled, maintained and policed with public money. That's the main reason those other countries are able to provide such good passenger rail service.

It is time to correct this disparity, if the U.S. is ever to have a 21st-century rail transportation system.

2. Improve the public transit system

Good passenger rail service cannot exist in a vacuum. People have to be able to get to train stations, and to get from train

stations to their final destinations, quickly and easily. And they need this supplementary transportation to be affordable and convenient, and to run frequently, all day and well into the night, not just during commute hours.

The only way to provide such service is with public transportation, with vehicles that carry multiple passengers. Low-occupancy motor vehicles, whether they are driven by a human being or autonomously, and no matter how energy-efficient they are, still clog up the roads with traffic congestion, slowing everyone down—including public transit vehicles that run on the same roads. They also create air pollution in the form of particulate matter, from tire and brake wear, and require vast amounts of land (surfaced with impermeable material) for parking.

3. Run more trains, more places, more often

We need trains that go more places: trains that connect cities with their surrounding less populated areas, trains that run between major metropolitan areas within the same region, and long-distance overnight trains that travel across state lines, serving both urban and rural areas. In the American West, especially, many rural communities rely on passenger trains; many of these communities have no other public transportation option, as they are not served by either buses or airlines.

Passenger trains bring customers for local businesses; carry rural residents to medical appointments or shopping excursions in cities, or to visit friends and relatives there; ferry college students to and from school; bring vacationers to national parks and other recreation areas.

Trains are a safe, relaxing and green way to travel; they are three times as fuel-efficient as commercial airplanes and twice as efficient as private automobiles. And they travel over permeable surfaces, allowing rainwater to soak into the ground rather than run over impermeable pavement, where it picks up toxins and carries them into rivers and streams.

Passenger trains are a good deal for Americans! Let's bring them into the 21st century!



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For more information, visit:

Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates:

<https://www.aortarail.org/>

All Aboard Washington: <https://www.aawa.us/>

Rail Passengers Association:

<https://www.railpassengers.org/>