

The Georgia Rail Report

GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION RAIL PROGRAMS / GEORGIA RAIL PASSENGER AUTHORITY

VOL. 1, No. 2

APRIL 2005

Tax credits will help railroads to improve infrastructure

Thanks to an exceptional effort by America's short-line and regional railroads, President Bush signed into law the American Jobs Creation Act of 2004 that among its many provisions allows Class II and Class III short-line railroads to earn tax credits against their federal tax liability by making "qualified railroad track maintenance investments."

The Act allows for these railroads to recoup expenditures on track, roadbed, bridges and other related track structures which are owned or leased by the railroad. The railroads will get a 50¢ tax credit for every dollar spent on such projects, up to a maximum that is based on the number of miles of track the railroad operates.

This provision is crucial to America's short line railroads. According to *Railway Age* magazine, about one of every four freight cars is handled by a short-line. Almost 1/3rd of all rail miles in Georgia are operated by short-lines and these incentives will help them to handle the new 286,000-pound freight cars that are coming on-line. **I**

Regional High-Speed Trains could carry a million people a year, study reports

A study funded by the Departments of Transportation of Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina and the federal government, and supported by Chambers of Commerce all along the rail route, indicates that the Macon-to-Charlotte corridor has very good market potential for high-speed passenger rail service. The study shows that high-speed trains traveling from Macon to Atlanta, Greenville and Charlotte could carry over 900,000 passengers a year, if speeds are great enough and trains run often enough.

Support for high-speed rail development is growing around the country. As a member of the House of Representatives, Johnny Isakson helped lead a coalition of House and Senate members from the south to get funding for this study and other rail initiatives. Now as a member of the U.S. Senate, he sits on the Environment and Public Works Committee, which has jurisdiction over clean air and surface transportation issues.

In a recent opinion piece in the *Atlanta Business Chronicle*, Sen. Isakson said, "I believe as an innovative way to connect our cities without increasing the burden on our interstates and airports," he says. "High-speed rail will complement the Southeast's existing transportation infrastructure, reduce congestion on the interstates between the region's economic centers and increase our competitiveness around the world."



Photo by Kevin Andrew Sadowski

90 to 110 MPH tilting trains like Amtrak's 'Cascades' could provide fast, frequent service between Georgia and North Carolina.

At present, only Amtrak's New York-to-New Orleans *Crescent* serves the Atlanta-Charlotte portion of the route, which is part of the Southeast High-Speed Rail Corridor, with one train in each direction every day. The section of the corridor from Charlotte north to Washington, D.C. is the subject of a separate study by North Carolina and Virginia. The study examined what improvements would be needed on the 366-mile Norfolk Southern corridor between Charlotte and Macon to institute higher levels of passenger train service and it evaluated the potential costs and ridership for several levels of service along the route: 2 daily trains running at the present maximum speed of 79 MPH; 4-to-6 trains a day at an improved maximum of 90 MPH; or 6-to-8 trains a day at 110 MPH.

To add two additional trains at 79 MPH new track capacity would be needed; existing track and signals would have to be up-

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High Speed Rail *(continued from page 1)*

graded, at-grade rail/highway crossings would need to be improved, and stations and maintenance facilities would need to be refurbished – not to mention the purchase of trains and locomotives. This option would carry 378,000 passengers a year, and cost \$171 million, according to estimates.

90 MPH service would require further improvement to tracks and signals, more track capacity and 28 miles of sharp curves smoothed out. This speed would shave 40 minutes off travel between Charlotte and Atlanta. At four trains a day in each direction, this option would cost \$1.14 billion in capital and it would carry 721,000 passengers a year.

An additional investment of \$220 million would put a total of six trips a day along the route at the 90 MPH top speed, which would carry almost 200,000 passengers more each year.

The 110 MPH option would require an additional \$735 million in capital for track, signals and new, dedicated rights-of-way. And, although the higher speed would attract an additional 28,000 riders, the higher speed would only cut about five minutes off of the 90 mph option, and would only result in additional revenue of \$1 million.

The study revealed that using tilting trains and straightening some curves, speeds of 90 MPH can be reached on only about 10% of the route, and 110 MPH can be attained on less than 5%. Average speeds can be raised to 60-72 mph, but in order to get to 150 mph or more, a substantially new railroad would have to be built, and that could cost tens of billions of dollars. The Norfolk Southern rail line considered in the study was laid out 130 years ago through very hilly terrain, and there are just too many curves and grade crossings on it to allow for significantly higher speeds.

The fact of rail transportation in America (and this is the case everywhere in the world) is that passenger rail does not operate at a profit. If we could afford to build a system that could average speeds over 90 MPH (with top speeds of 150), the report states, trains could possibly be run without additional operating support. But until and unless funds are made available from Washington and states are willing to match those funds to build brand-new high-speed railroads, the incremental options are the

*“The time has
come to consider
high-speed rail
throughout
the Southeast”*



Trains like the 220 MPH TGV in France must have their own dedicated infrastructure like this multi-million dollar bridge built new in order to safely reach their top speeds.

only ones that can be expected to become operational.

A source of funds for operating assistance over what is brought in through the farebox to make these high-speed trains operate will have to be identified. Costs vary depending on the number of trips and the speed of the trains. Assistance would run from a low of \$4.6 million a year to a high of \$23.8 million. One of the more likely scenarios of four round-trips at a top speed of 90 MPH would require assistance of \$12.2 million annually. Where such funds would come from – the federal government, a consortium of state governments or one of local governments – is still being explored.

The study concludes that there is still much more work to be done. It recommends that the three states, in concert with the federal government, undertake the following activities in the corridor:

- Conduct an environmental analysis to highlight any significant impact of program alternatives
- Create a computer model for forecasting demand along the Charlotte-Atlanta corridor
- Evaluate host railroads' capacity requirements
- Conduct public out-reach along the corridor

Senator Isakson has secured \$700,000 in federal funds to continue the study work needed, but a local match from the three states is needed. Georgia's share is \$100,000 and there are efforts underway to make that money part of the 2006 budget.

The full report is available on the web at: www.garail.com/Pages/macontocharlotte.htm. **I**

Rail / Highway crossing safety is a major part of Georgia's commuter train program

In its continuing effort to promote highway safety, the Georgia Department of Transportation commissioned a grade crossing study of the entire 103 miles of railroad on the Macon Corridor as part of the planning for passenger rail service between Macon and Atlanta.

The line to Macon will use the route of the old Central of Georgia Railroad. Today, the line is owned by Norfolk Southern Railroad and is commonly referred to as the "S-Line." Train speeds on the line are presently in the 20-30 mile-per-hour range and train traffic south of the Ford Automotive plant in Hapeville is generally on the order of 1-2 trains per day. The state's Rail Passenger Program calls for commuter passenger trains to operate at speeds of 50 - 70 mph during both morning and afternoon periods.

The study examined each crossing to determine if it was needed for local road traffic. A traffic analysis was done at many of them. If the crossing was needed, the study then examined what could be done to make it safer – could the crossing be upgraded with new or better signals? Or, could it be separated, that is going over or under the railroad? If a crossing was not crucial to automobile traffic, the study considered the need to either consolidate it with other crossings or perhaps just close it altogether.

Between Macon and Atlanta, there are 135 public and 23 private crossings. Some crossings have gates and signal lights and some only have signal lights. All of them are marked with the traditional cross-buck (Railroad Crossing) signs. There are also a few crossings where the local city or county transportation departments have added STOP signs as additional precaution for motorists.

In general, there are two kinds of automated signal crossings: Crossings that only have flashing red lights and crossings that have automatic gates along with flashing lights. Over the years, additional safety features have been developed including median barriers and "4-quadrant" gates (with lights and gates on both lanes on both sides of the crossing). These safety features are designed to help keep motorists from driving their cars around gates and in front of oncoming trains.

The first phase of commuter train service on the Macon Corridor is the Lovejoy-to-Atlanta segment. Within this 26-mile section, there are 32 public crossings. The study recommends closing seven crossings, upgrading the warning devices at six crossings and making additional modifications to the remainder of the crossings for a total cost of \$9 million.

The report estimates that with the addition of 4 passenger trains running at higher speeds, the improvements will actually reduce grade-crossing accidents on the corridor. But of even greater significance, operation of commuter trains on the Lovejoy-to-Atlanta section of the corridor will reduce overall vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by 17 million a year, and that equates to 53 fewer highway crashes every year. The full report is on the Georgia Rail Program's web site at www.garail.com. **I**



Photo by Paul D. Pleasant

A St. Mary's Railway train crosses Osborne Street in St. Mary's, Ga. protected by a standard signal and gate warning device.



GRPP Photo

In Hazlehurst, Ga., the city has installed "STOP" signs to add emphasis to the railroad's cross-bucks.



GRPP Photo

An Amtrak Cascade train crosses a highway along Puget Sound in Washington State. This crossing is protected by lights, gates and a median barrier which prevents motorists from running around the lowered gates.

WASHINGTON WATCH:**House okay's \$284 billion for highways and transit**

The House of Representatives has approved a six-year, \$284 billion highway and transit transportation funding bill. Known as "The Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users," or "TEA-LU," the 800-page bill will supersede the "TEA-21" legislation that first made federal funds available for

commuter rail projects. The measure passed in the House 417 to 9.

Although Highways get the biggest slice of the funding pie, there are two new provisions for rail funding. The newly added Title IX would "increase the authorization for an existing program of high speed rail corridor development and technology improvement grants at a funding level of \$100 million a year through fiscal years 2006-2013," according to a press release from the office of Transportation & Infrastructure Committee Chairman Don Young of Alaska.

The second provision, which is a first in federal transportation funding, would establish a freight intermodal distribution pilot grant program to facilitate and support intermodal freight transportation initiatives at inland ports and freight facilities. While inclusion in the Bill of a formal "rail title" eluded advocates, the inclusion of these provisions is seen as a positive step forward for the railroad industry.

According to a House analysis, the measure represents an increase of 42 percent over the spending in the previous highway bill passed in 1998. Within the measure, \$225.5 billion would go to the Federal Highway Administration; \$52.3 billion

to the Federal Transit Administration; \$3.2 billion for the National Traffic and Highway Safety Administration; and \$2.9 billion for the Motor Carrier Safety Administration. Nothing dealing with Amtrak was included in the bill.

H.R. 3 now goes to the Senate for consideration. Congress is working to pass the legislation before May 1st, when the TEA-21 continuing resolution will expire.

No funds for Amtrak?

The Bush Administration's initial budget recommendation for Fiscal Year 2006 called for no subsidy for the national passenger railroad. Administration officials assert that this action will actually improve rail passenger service throughout the nation while critics scoff that the states are in no position to pick up the entire cost of Amtrak's operations. All Amtrak service to Georgia would likely be discontinued if funding is cut.

Of last year's \$1.2 billion appropriation, Amtrak used \$325 million to cover costs of operations not covered by ticket sales and other income. The balance was used for capital maintenance and debt service. Resolution of the matter will take several months.

In its budget, the Administration recommended \$34.7 billion in highway construction and maintenance funds; \$13.8 billion for the Federal Aviation Administration, which provides the nation's air traffic control system that guides commercial airliners; and \$3 billion to the Army Corps of Engineers for ports, harbors and inland waterways. **I**

The Georgia Rail Report

is published by the

GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
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ON SCHEDULE

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| April 10-12 | Center for Transportation Excellence's Transit Initiatives in Communities Conference
Charlotte, N.C.
www.cfte.org/TIC/2005conf.asp |
| May 25 | Ga. Rail Passenger Authority Regular Meeting
Atlanta, GA
http://www.dot.state.ga.us/dot/grpa/index.shtml |
| June 8-10 | Ga. Rail Association Annual Meeting
Jekyll Island, GA
www.georgiarailroad.org |
| June 14-15 | National Corridors Initiative's "TransPlan 21" Conference
Washington, DC
www.nationalcorridors.org |