

THE RAILROAD NETWORK: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE Bike Trails for the People

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December 6, 2004

Introduction

As we move into the 21st century, we need to come to grips with certain basic realities. On the one hand, resources are limited and are not increasing, yet our wants and needs are limitless. On the other hand, measures to conserve resources are expensive and themselves consume resources. It therefore behooves us to seize inexpensive opportunities to aid the environment as they come our way. If we do not, the eventual bill may be much higher.

One obvious avenue to be further developed is that of alternative transportation such as hybrid vehicles, mass transit, and, of course, bicycles.

This last opportunity has great potential, yet is one of the most under-utilized options at present.

Problem

Bicycles can be manufactured easily and cheaply. Operating costs approach zero, and they require few specialized skills to use. These are advantages cars lack. Cars, however, have one great advantage over bikes - our society is built around cars. Parking lots are common; bike racks are rare. Roads are omnipresent; bike trails are almost nonexistent.

Clearly further exploitation of bicycles faces a few problems, but these can be solved - for a price. A complete solution would be very expensive, but initially we do not require a perfect answer. Luckily, there exists a cheap

and effective answer to one of the more obdurate of these problems - the lack of bike trails.

Solution

The greater New York City region, including northern New Jersey, is densely covered in rail networks. These rail lines go between most of the larger towns and cities in the area. Sadly, the trains that run on this network are nearing capacity. Adding more cars to each train, or more trains to each track, is in many cases physically impossible. However, there is more to the railways than the actual rails, and more ways to transport people along the railways than just onboard trains.

It would be quite inexpensive to build bike trails alongside the rails. A paved, 10-foot wide multi-use trail is usually estimated as costing \$100,000 per mile. If the trail is narrower, unpaved, and/or mountain bike specific, the cost can drop to under \$10,000 per mile. One state railroad operator, New Jersey Transit, currently uses 530 miles of track. Therefore, if we choose a mid-range estimate of \$50,000 per mile, we arrive at a total cost of approximately \$26,500,000 for 530 miles of new and useful bike trails. Although an impressive sum, this figure must be placed in context. New Jersey Transit has a capital program budget of \$1,341,000,000 for fiscal year 2004, while the New Jersey Department of Transportation has an additional \$1,288,000,000, for a total of over \$2,600,000,000. In other words, building such a network would add almost exactly 1% to the amount the state of New Jersey has spent on transportation infrastructure this year alone.

Finally, to make evaluating this option easier, the \$50,000 per mile cost for bike paths compares favorably to the cost for rail networks (\$50,000,000 or more per mile) and for road networks (\$100,000,000 or more per mile).

Conclusion

The addition of bike paths to pre-existing rail right-of-ways should be both inexpensive and effective. It has the potential to make a significant contribution to the growing transportation and environmental problems of the 21st century. More importantly, it is a positive step that we can take immediately. Other steps, though they might bring greater benefits, require such

massive capital expenditure for infrastructure as to render them impractical and make them unlikely to be implemented without delay. A greatly expanded rail network is a fine thing, but an expanded rail network which never makes it off the drawing board improves our lives little. Bike trails, by contrast, can make a positive impact on the world.