

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL



State Can Lead Way On Transportation

By Daymon Ely

July 31, 2011

The current woes of the Rail Runner result from a failure of leadership, not of finances.

The Department of Transportation and the governor could announce, today, that the funds are available to support the Rail Runner. This would show a firm and lasting commitment to New Mexico's future economic development, particularly along the middle Rio Grande corridor.

There is plenty of highway money available for the Rail Runner to make up for any deficit. Right now, the current highway department budget is \$350 million. The shortfall for weekend service is \$1.5 million. There are no savings in the entire highway budget to pay for the rail service?

And severance money, used for capital expenses, also will increase this year because of higher revenues from oil and gas. The question is, therefore, not whether New Mexico has the money to keep the rail going, but whether there is the political will to do so.

As a county commissioner in Sandoval County in 2004, I was involved in the early stages of planning and development of the rail project. Our county contributed \$10 million to the rail to ensure its completion. We did so for a variety of reasons, but four reasons stood out: (1) economic development, (2) a smart use of public money, (3) environmental concerns and (4) diversifying our transportation systems.

With respect to economic benefits, we learned that we were losing out to national employers because we could not move people efficiently to their places of work. Without rail, employers looking to locate here realized that people had only one way to get to work – their cars. This put us behind any competition with other communities that have mass transportation. And rail, unlike other forms of mass transit, signals a permanent commitment to move people.

Other economic benefits involve businesses that see increased commerce promoted by rail. That is why businesses in Santa Fe were concerned about the potential loss of weekend service.

Rail is also a smart use of public money. The entire rail project costs less than three upgrades to any significant freeway interchange. Unlike rail, there is no revenue from any freeway project. The Belen-to-Santa Fe route is particularly important because it relieves vexing problems that we would ultimately face in widening Interstate 25 from Santa Fe to Albuquerque. The costs of expanding I-25 for this 50 miles will dwarf the money spent on the Rail Runner. There is no guarantee that we can obtain the right of way necessary for widening this stretch of highway, and any widening will make this portion of the highway increasingly dangerous and time-consuming.

Environment is certainly a concern. As a Sandoval County commissioner, I sat on the Air Quality Task Force. For anyone paying attention, the amount of toxins related to car emissions along the Rio Grande corridor is just astounding and getting worse. We will never get people out of their cars, but at least we can give them alternatives. And finally, diversifying our transportation. For too long the state Department of Transportation has decided that roads are the only option. Virtually every other western state has now reached the obvious conclusion – roads are important, but rail is an essential component to any transportation system, particularly inter-city rail. Even conservative communities like Phoenix have supported and funded rail projects.

It seems popular to talk about how much rail costs. But, actually, we were able to build a system that other states can only dream about. Don't we want to be a forward-thinking, visionary state to attract jobs, and not simply the cheapest state?

Daymon Ely is an attorney practicing in Albuquerque.