Are the railroads returning?

Story of Blue Cross, Blue Shield
The trains may be coming back

Imagine grass growing through the pavement on New Hampshire's three Interstate highways. Hardly any cars travel them anymore since gasoline is in such short supply and so expensive. Just a few motorcycles and small cars, which have been converted to methanol fuel, purr along where hundreds of cars once sped by at 70 miles per hour every day.

And in winter, the highways are snow covered because there isn't enough traffic to warrant plowing.

Such a situation would have been hard to imagine just a year ago, but today it isn't so far-fetched. With gasoline supplies dwindling, prices increasing and a mandatory 50 mph speed limit on the horizon, the era of individualized motor transportation will come to an end.

It's only a matter of time before gasoline powered cars and trucks disappear from New Hampshire highways, but that doesn't mean the state's economy has to come to a screeching halt or that lifestyles will have to be drastically altered. That's because there exists a viable alternative to automobile transportation in the railroad.

The legislative committee said the B&M can't hold a lantern to the Canadian National (a government owned line) or the Maine Central which operate on 133 miles of track in the North Country. Maine Central, however, recently petitioned the federal Interstate Commerce Commission for permission to abandon a section of track near Colebrook.

Although rail lines south of the White Mountains are in miserable shape, they could be brought back to where they could efficiently haul passengers, mail and freight provided there were a change in ownership, an influx of capital and a lot of hard work. But how should this conversion be handled? What should be the goal? Railroad experts Herbert Bixler of Jaffrey and Edgar Mead of Hanover have given a good deal of thought to these questions. They both think New Hampshire railroading and the company wants to abandon all but a non-existent, freight service is constantly diminishing. The largest railroad operating in New Hampshire is the B&M, which operates over two-thirds of the state's railtrackage, has pursued a policy of curtailing service, deferring maintenance, diverting traffic and discouraging shippers, receivers and passengers, causing them to leave New Hampshire's railroads.

"In the last three years, the B&M has stepped up this process, applying for the abandonment of about 150 miles of track within the state. From the skeleton of rail that remains, the B&M continues to contemplate abandonments and reductions in service. It has put no regular maintenance into most of its branch lines for over 10 years. Rather, it has followed a policy of tearing the tracks down until they can no longer sustain efficient operation, then curtailing service until the users no longer benefit and are forced to leave."
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New Hampshire, What happens to the line between the cost if the State of New Hampshire wanted to buy them. The state would have to put up the rest of the money. Bixler and Mead think the state should do just that and then rent the lines out to independent shortline operators.

As a consultant a few years ago, Bixler recommended to the State of Vermont that it purchase the bankrupt Rutland Railroad. Vermont did, and on Bixler’s advice leased it to an independent shortline operator. It cost Vermont hardly a penny to do the job and today the independent line is healthier than ever. Bixler’s advice had worked so well for Vermont that in 1972, former Gov. Walter Peterson hired him to investigate and make recommendations for New Hampshire to revive its railroads. Bixler’s report urged the state to buy the branch lines of the Boston & Maine and divide them into three shortline operations, each to be leased to an independent operator.

“This is essentially what Vermont is doing,” said Bixler. “The shortline operator pays rent to cover the debt service on the loan. So the state pays nothing out of pocket. The shortline is financed by the state, but not subsidized. He thinks shortlines would be more efficient and profitable than if the federal government subsidized the B&M to operate all its branch lines.

“A shortline has two basic advantages,” says Bixler. “First of all, it can make different flexible arrangements with labor. It can have all the freedom to send men to do jobs regardless of the job classification. This is important for efficiency. And the second reason is the closeness of management to the operation. The manager of a shortline knows his shippers personally. He goes to the same Rotary Club because they do. He knows what his customers want and provides it with more entrepreneurship.”

Hanover Selectman Edgar Mead, author of an account of New Hampshire’s golden age of railroading called Through Church Bells to Concord, envisions a New England commission which would operate all main lines in New England. It would be one of a National Railroad Commission which would manage main lines all over the country. These government agencies would run modern, efficient, high-speed passenger trains to strategic locations inside New Hampshire. Independent shortlines would take it from there.

“An independent shortline contractor who rents the track owns his own locomotives and cars is the best answer,” says Mead. “He could haul freight, passengers and try things like special ski trains. The passengers are fascinating.”

Mead is especially interested in a revival of railroad passenger service. Main line trains would bring passengers to certain cities, such as Concord and Portsmouth, and the independent shortlines would board local commuter and bus passengers. “If you’re going to have 100 mph trains coming to Concord, it has got to be the base for a regional transportation system. So you get arranged so that after you get off the high-speed train in Concord you can board a high-speed bus for Lebanon or a train for New London or wherever.”

Mead thinks both convenience and speed should be emphasized to persuade people to sell their cars and travel by train. “You’ve got to concentrate on convenience and speed as well as speed,” he says. “Trains have got to be comfortable and cheap. After all, what is an automobile but convenience? It’s a portable womb. A passenger train has got to be another form of the womb.”

If Bixler’s recommendations were followed, New Hampshire would have three shortline railroads. One would serve the eastern cities between the seacoast and Concord. The second would run between the Merrimack Valley and the valleys between Concord and Lebanon and Concord and Lincoln. “The Conway Branch and the Monadnock line would get it but the Central and the Mononick line would not get it but the Central,” he says. “It’s a portent of doom. A passenger train has got to be another form of the womb.”

According to Charles Douglas III, Thomson’s transportation consultant, New Hampshire’s shortline operators would in all probability want the state to provide them with a network of independent shortlines. The trucking companies oppose his idea for three independent shortlines, “they don’t know what’s good for them. Railroads would improve the economy and create more business for trucking.”

The trucks reportedly favor reviving the railroads, but they haven’t decided yet whether they favor independent shortlines or a federally subsidized B&M. They’re being cautious.

The legitimate truckers we’ve talked to realize that truck and rail freight can be and must be part of a team,” says Representative Hoar. “We don’t want to get into a fight with the truckers. Each mode of transportation has its place. We’re trying to encourage truckers and railroads to work together.”

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“The strongest influence in favor of the railroads right now is the energy crisis,” Bixler says. “It’s forcing attention on the most efficient way to use energy—railroads. Trains use energy about four times more efficiently than trucks. In addition, we may find we are awfully silly converting our power plants from coal to oil a few years ago. We will probably have to change them back and hauling coal is going to be good for the railroads.”

Members of the legislature’s Committee on Railroads also think the energy crisis is generating wide public interest for reviving the railroads. They point to the federal legislation almost certain to become law. "What we do depends on what action the federal government takes and also what happens with the B&M bankruptcy proceedings," says Rep. John Hoar Jr., R-Epping, chairman of the ad hoc committee. "The whole situation is breaking faster nationally than anybody realizes.

Hoar says his committee also plans to introduce one or two railroad bills at the next legislative session to reveal the content of those bills. The committee’s preliminary report strongly implies support of Bixler’s recommendations for state purchase of the B&M branch lines and their subsequent lease to independent shortline operators. But neither Hoar nor other committee members will say flat out they favor a network of independent shortlines. The reason for their reticence is that a significant battle appears to be shaping up for the special legislative session to be held this winter. Besides the promoters of independent shortlines, there are other forces to be reckoned with. The administration of Gov. Medlimmon Thompson favors an improvement of rail service in New Hampshire through a federal subsidy to the B&M. Operation of its New Hampshire branch lines by the B&M, with expenses paid by the federal government, would be possible under the federal railroad legislation now before the U.S. Senate. That’s what the B&M wants and so does Thompson.

According to Charles Douglas III, Thomson’s railroad advisor, the governor has not completely rejected the idea of independent shortlines and no more B&M, but he prefers subsidizing the Boston & Maine so it can do the job properly. Ironically, which method of solving New Hampshire’s number one transportation problem is finally selected may well depend on the trucking industry. The truckers hold about as much political power in New Hampshire today as the railroads did a century ago. The industry’s two principal operatives in the legislature are Democratic senators J.C. Cleaveland of Hudson and John McLaughlin of Nashua. Both own large trucking outfits, both control the key Senate Transportation Committee and Cleaveland is also the Senate member of the Ad Hoc Committee on Railroads.

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Transportation consultant Herbert Bixler says if trucking companies oppose his idea for three independent shortlines, "they don’t know what’s good for them. Railroads would improve the economy and create more business for trucking. Railroads are important for trying New Hampshire to the rest of the country. Trucks are needed for local hauling.

After a decision is made to bring back the railroads to haul freight and passengers, Edgar Mead thinks it will be three years before the railroads can be modernized enough to handle the job adequately. "That’s the amount of lead time that will be necessary. We have only 200 miles of track in that can handle 100 mph trains. There is simply not enough equipment. All Amtrak has is 1400 passenger coaches. The B&M has only 60 overworked Buddliners. What we are doing to build more equipment and build a whole new railroad structure.”

by Charlie Calley

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