

All aboard

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A Senate committee has approved legislation that would provide sufficient money to keep Amtrak running, rejecting efforts by the Bush administration to starve the rail service into extinction.

That's a good thing for Vermont because, owing to efforts by Sen. James Jeffords, improvements to the rail infrastructure on the western side of the state may lead to passenger rail service linking Burlington, Rutland and Bennington with points south.

Ideally, improved rail service would offer more options for passengers who find that the Ethan Allen to Rutland does not fit their schedules, requiring a drive to Albany, N.Y., for a connection to New York City.

Over the years, Amtrak has been the neglected stepchild of America's transportation system. It has fallen victim to the American tendency to avoid overspending by not spending enough. The result is a rail system that prompts frequent complaints and that can't pay for itself. It is given just enough money to fail.

But it fails only according to an impossible standard. No other mode of transportation is required to pay for itself. Airlines and autos and trucks benefit from vast government subsidies that are taken for granted. Members of Congress, eager to contain spending, have been reluctant to expend the money needed to create a first-class passenger rail service. As proof that they have been frugal with our tax money they can point to the barely adequate service provided by Amtrak. It is a guarantee for mediocrity.

In the Northeast, it is clear that Amtrak is no mere luxury. It provides quick and convenient connections between major cities, relieving airports and highways. The importance of Amtrak was all too apparent following Sept. 11.

Overall, Amtrak carried 25 million passengers last year. The train may no longer be the preferred way of traveling from New York to San Francisco. But millions of passengers understand that, given the waits required in airports and the travel to and from airports, taking the train is often just as fast for trips of a few hundred miles.

An energy program that made sense would place an emphasis on rail service. Instead Bush proposed getting the government out of the passenger rail service altogether. Then last month, the Senate Appropriations Committee voted to increase Amtrak's funding from \$1.2 billion to \$1.45 billion, which is the level that Amtrak says it needs to continue operations. There is another bill in the works that would create a separate fund to support improvements to the rail infrastructure, while reducing Amtrak's operating budget.

There is no reason that the United States could not have an efficient and convenient passenger rail service. We are not a Third World nation. All it requires is for policymakers to agree that an advanced nation

with an energy-efficient infrastructure requires a degree of investment that will make it happen.

Jeffords was remarkably successful in directing federal money to Vermont by way of the new transportation bill. Per capita, Vermont received the second most of any state from special appropriations in the bill.

If improved passenger rail service is the result, it will be money well spent.