



Rail

At the Heart of America's Communities

Stations





“ Stations are the heart of the 21st Century passenger rail system.”

H. Brent Coles, Mayor of Boise



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Preface

With our new century just starting, this is a good time for communities across the country to reflect on where we are and where we want to be. How do we make our cities places that improve the quality of life? How do we make them places where people interact, share ideas and build a future together?

Where we live is one of the primary elements that defines who we are. Upon meeting, after names are exchanged, the next question usually asked is “Where do you live?” And what best represents where we live? As much as I love our community’s new regional mall, it doesn’t define Meridian. The interstate highways surely don’t. Even our neighborhoods, while they play a role, don’t define the entire community because each neighborhood is a little different –a mini-community. There’s only one place that truly represents an entire community—downtown.

Our downtowns have been under siege for years, to a great degree by the interstates and super highways that slash through downtown or bypass it entirely. Larger cities are plagued with what’s become known as urban sprawl and, even in our smaller communities, we’re experiencing suburban creep.

These alarming trends long ago lured the residents from our downtowns to the wide lawns and back patios of suburbia, and since then have been consistently siphoning away the retailers and other service providers who need to be where the people are. But when we allow our downtowns to die, we are squandering existing resources, throwing away what’s already been paid for, ignoring our history and obliterating our sense of place.

In downtown Meridian, we still have a sense of place but it had eroded and now we are bringing it back.

The revitalization of downtown began about 12 years ago with a simple, public project to rescue a community landmark—a World War I monument—from a sea of asphalt. The creation of this mini-park reawakened our interest in our downtown. We began other projects to help restore downtown and to build on one element of the downtown economy that maintained its vitality over the years and that helped stem the downward decline: our medical industry. Our three major hospitals and ancillary services have continued to grow and are in an almost constant state of expansion.

But we still needed one bold stroke—one catalyst so strong that it would leverage significant private investment in downtown. That came with the development of Union Station, a re-creation of our 1905 station that houses Amtrak and Greyhound as well as our local transit system; provides a beautiful gateway to the community and serves as a hub of community life.

Union Station has become, quite simply, the most popular meeting place in the community. And, while we had envisioned the public spaces being used for meetings and conferences, we have been amazed and delighted to see how the community has

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embraced Union Station in a very personal way for weddings, receptions, reunions, birthday parties and a host of other events bringing together family and friends.

The economic impact has been equally as impressive. In just three years, Union Station has leveraged more than \$10 million in private investment in the Front Street area alone—from a plumbing supply business that reflects the district's commercial roots, to the old Union Hotel that's been converted into apartment units and is bringing residents back downtown.

Just as we are renewing downtown, we must reinvigorate our national passenger rail system. As a member of the Amtrak Board of Directors, I can tell you that we are absolutely committed to rail as a transportation option, one that utilizes existing resources, helps the environment, provides a meaningful alternative to millions more miles of concrete and asphalt and makes travel possible even for those with few other options available to them. Making rail travel even more viable is the development of high-speed rail, now in the northeast but with other corridors designated around the country, including the Gulf Coast Corridor, which will extend from Houston to Jacksonville on the coast and from New Orleans to Atlanta from south to northeast.

High-speed rail is coming, and it will strengthen a transportation system too long enslaved by the automobile. High-speed rail will also be a component of what I envision to be a seamless travel experience from small towns to major hubs. A traveler buys a ticket and checks his baggage at a small town like Newton, Mississippi, then takes the bus to Meridian, where he boards the train for about a two-hour trip to New Orleans, where he boards a jet for a flight to London. When he arrives, so does his luggage, and one ticket was all he needed to make the entire trip. When this experience becomes a reality, we will truly have a global community.

Through all of the transportation decisions we make, we must have as our goal the creation and nurturing of places to treasure. Ugliness, isolation, cookie cutter sameness are not inevitable. They are choices we make. But we can make other choices if we're tough enough to fight the critics who long ago decided that bland and impersonal were acceptable and that more highways and bigger airports could solve all our transportation problems.

When Union Station was under construction, one resident filed a lawsuit to stop it, others complained that it was too expensive. Since then, Union Station has won statewide and international awards for its architecture and for its pivotal role as an economic catalyst and the people of our community treasure it as a space where they can come together.

Our Union Station and our connection to the national rail system have enabled Meridian to re-establish our downtown as the center of our community life and our economic heart.

Mayor John Robert Smith, Meridian, Mississippi
Chairman, Great American Station Foundation



Station Investment Builds Stronger Communities

Hank Dittmar, President, Great American Station Foundation

America's train stations were at the heart of the new economy that emerged in the United States after the Civil War. Rail stations, depots and the support facilities that emerged around them such as hotels, freight companies and warehouses were the harbingers of a national economy built on vanquishing the tyranny of distance. New transportation and communications technologies shaped new towns and cities, and great buildings and business districts sprang up to serve this new economy.

The rise of the Interstate highway system and a national aviation network brought about a decline in passenger rail travel, and led to disinvestment in our central cities and main streets. Now the very popularity of roads and airways and the resulting congestion has led to a resurgence of interest in passenger rail, and a growing realization that reinvestment in stations and the neighborhoods around them can support the new economy of the next century. We are finding that place matters in the new economy, that reinvestment in stations can create value in the historic neighborhoods around them, and that these neighborhoods can again become centers of transportation and communication technology.

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The Great American Station Foundation was founded to build partnerships to revitalize the great rail stations of America, and in so doing to improve transportation choices and build economically stronger communities. We target stations endangered by neglect and threatened by demolition, provide technical assistance and seed grants to cities and non-profit organizations seeking to revitalize stations, and we assist communities who are attempting to revitalize around stations. In considering the later, we are investigating barriers to transit oriented development and are planning to provide services to communities who wish to overcome these barriers.

In America's smaller cities, we have found that reinvestment in stations can be coupled with a focus on bridging the digital divide. Our E-Station project will pilot the concept of linking

Station revitalization is a growing trend, and this document serves as a status report on this new movement.

Why Stations Are Important

Stations are At the Heart of the 21st Century Transportation System

Rail stations in America represent an enormous investment of space and infrastructure that can be reclaimed as we build a new intercity and metropolitan transportation infrastructure. The station itself is the intermodal transfer point between the coming high-speed rail system, commuter rail and light rail, and intercity bus, rapid bus transit and local bus services. Craig Lentzsch, president and CEO of Greyhound, supports rail station redevelopment because he sees it "as an opportunity to provide intermodal service that



broad-band access, development of a computer literate workforce, and business incubators with the revitalization of historic railroad era structures. High-speed telecommunications lines connecting urban centers are often run along rail corridors passing directly through, but not surfacing at, many rural communities. E-Station will bring these lines out of the corridor and into a local access point, giving rural communities a physical link to high-speed telecommunications networks. Underutilized or vacant structures at or near the station will be provided the connectivity and the office infrastructure necessary to attract related enterprises such as dot.coms or call centers. They also will offer facilities for training and community access. The E-Station is a way to provide rural America with a level technological playing field, as well as to build a platform to enable residents in rural communities to participate in the new economy.

greatly expands the reach of public transportation, whether it is regional or national, and gives the customer real choice in transportation service."

Stations are At the Heart of America's Communities

Whether they are on Main Street or in Downtown, America's great stations were built at the core of American cities and towns, and hence at the core of our increasingly metropolitan economy. Cities that invest in station projects are making a visible commitment to downtown revitalization.

Rail Stations Are an Important Part of Our Heritage

The great stations of our country are important historical and architectural expressions of our growth as a nation, and of our core values and beliefs. Railroad stations are often the most beautiful public space in a community, and they represent

an important part of the community's collective memory. Truly, they are America's living rooms.

The Benefits of Station Revitalization

Station revitalization can have multiple benefits, and that's why it is such an attractive prospect. Station projects bridge the transportation and land use divide in a positive manner, providing transportation, economic and quality of life benefits in direct and quantifiable ways.

Station Revitalization Builds Ridership Before and after studies conducted by Amtrak have shown that ridership increases at revitalized stations by between 20 and 30 percent. Ridership at Washington's Union Station increased by 25 percent

built on a grand scale, even in smaller cities. They have housed offices for the railroads, hotel, eating houses and other facilities, most of which are no longer in operation. In many cases, the opportunity exists to remake the train station into a mixed-use center of economic activity, while still accommodating train and bus service. In fact, the continual throughput of passengers makes train stations attractive locations for both office and retail. The new station facilities, which have included other uses, have stimulated employment and retail sales. Washington's Union Station contains an entire shopping center with 140 shops and restaurants, and it's a sought after retail location. Perhaps the finest example of the station as bazaar concept is the award-winning restoration of New York's Grand Central Terminal by the MTA and architect John Belle. The 119 retail and dining spaces have seamlessly been blended in to the pedestrian

“Whether it is Meridian, MS or Washington, DC, restored train stations increase ridership significantly. Those are results we pay attention to and the key reason for Amtrak's support of the Great American Station Foundation.”

George D. Warrington, Amtrak President

after its renovation, and Amtrak ridership at Meridian's Union Station jumped 25 percent while Greyhound patronage grew by 15 percent. Statewide Amtrak patronage in Michigan went up 30 percent after a state-local partnership took over management of the state's stations. Ridership at the Flint, Michigan station grew by 55 percent after that station's restoration. In Tampa, ridership is up by more than 20 percent after the renovation of the station. In Los Angeles, the renovation of Union Station was planned to accommodate the over 1000 percent patronage increase projected to occur by 2010 with the build out of that region's intercity, commuter and light rail systems. Clearly the attractiveness, convenience, quality of amenities and services of rail stations are key factors in the growth or decline of ridership.

Station Projects Can Become Economic Activity Centers America's great train stations and depots were often

functioning of the space, and Grand Central has once again become one of the trendiest places to be seen in Manhattan. The South Station project in Boston renovated 134,000 square feet of office space, 15,000 square feet of retail space and accommodated about 600 new jobs.

Smaller stations have also been successful in integrating commercial uses. In Maplewood, New Jersey, rail commuters are met by a station concierge, who acts as a representative of retail business owners in the surrounding community, such as cleaners and travel agents. In Memphis, the former Illinois Central offices have become attractive loft housing. In each of these cases, the station has moved from being simply a transportation facility to being a service center, allowing an increasingly busy populace to combine commuting and shopping, eating, and in Memphis, sleeping.

Station Revitalization Catalyzes Community

Revitalization Meridian's Union Station project has sparked over \$10 million of reinvestment in the surrounding downtown, because the business community recognized the stake the City has made in its future. In Washington, DC, a study conducted in the mid-nineties found that 13 million square feet of privately developed office space followed the Union Station restoration. Property values in Memphis' South Main Street Historic District have reportedly quadrupled since announcement of the Memphis Central Station project. Lafayette, Indiana's station project has prompted a \$36 million development adjacent to the station and pedestrian bridge project.

Station Revitalization Engages the Community

Time after time, cities find that station renovations spark

a community. They are one of the last expressions of greatness in public architecture, and one of the few places where everybody in a community comes together. Remaking train stations is about knitting community back together.

Federal Policy Agenda

The station revitalization trend can be encouraged by federal policies that leverage state and local public investment and encourage the development of public-private partnerships. The result will be an economic stimulus for our communities and improved access to transportation choices. Station investment builds a front door to America's downtowns, but also an inviting front door to the 21st Century alternative to overcrowded highways and airports. These policy options can help make it happen.

“**Rail Station Development offers us the opportunity to provide intermodal service that greatly expands the reach of public transportation, whether it is regional or national.**”

Craig R. Lentzsch, Greyhound

tremendous demand for community use of the facility. One of the operational challenges faced by the City of Meridian was the need to handle the use of the station as the location of choice for weddings, reunions and other community gatherings. Retail plans for Grand Central's Vanderbilt Hall had to be abandoned because of the room's popularity for community functions. Marshall, Texas Mayor Audrey Kariel's successful renovation of the Marshall depot was made possible by a huge outpouring of support from the community. Author Tony Hiss attributes this community engagement to an "architecture of hope". He says that: "Fixing up the train station — or, where necessary, creating one from scratch — is the one act that in many people's minds signals the beginning of true civic healing.

Another factor in this community engagement process is that train stations are often the largest and grandest public space in

Smart Community Tax Credit As the Administration and Congress debate a tax bill, they should implement a smart growth tax credit, loosely patterned after the affordable housing and historic preservation tax credits. Such a program could provide a tax credit for mixed use, mixed income, walkable developments in close proximity to or adjoining the development or redevelopment of high capacity transit stations. This tax credit would stimulate environmentally positive private investment with quality of life benefits.

Tax Credit Bonds for High Speed Rail The Administration should support legislation to authorize Amtrak and the states to issue up to \$1-2 billion annually in tax credit bonds to finance high-speed rail. In many regions this is a more cost-effective transportation solution for intercity travel than expanding an airport or runways.

Station and Community Revitalization Grant Program

In order to stimulate station redevelopment, the Administration should propose a new revitalization program to support city's plans for station revitalization projects that both improve intermodal transportation and stimulate community revitalization. The program could be funded at \$250 million in the first year and increase to \$500 million in year four. It would provide grants to local governments, transit authorities, and other entities that own stations to stimulate public-private partnerships in the revitalization of rail stations and adjacent communities.

Private Activity Bonds for Stations and Station Oriented Development

Congress and the new Administration should consider creating a new category of private activity bonds that would stimulate public-private partnerships in station projects and station oriented development, including new stations and rehabilitation of existing station complexes.



“Our station program is re-connecting our communities to each other and to the larger world. They are also the source of intense community pride.”

David King, Deputy Secretary, NC DOT