

Investing in freight rail can also get us back on track

Your Turn

John Shwed
Guest columnist

Wilmington is home to one of the nation's busiest Amtrak stations, a hub of the Northeast Corridor servicing nine different Amtrak routes as well as regional commuter trains. The station, of course, also bears the name of President Joe Biden, who famously commuted by train during his 36 years in the Senate — amassing some 7,000 trips between Delaware and Washington, D.C., he has said.

It's fitting that "Amtrak Joe" wants to invest heavily in passenger rail travel. The newly passed Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act would provide some

\$66 billion to Amtrak to improve service and expand to new cities. Over one-third of that would be dedicated to us in the NEC.

The president is right to invest in passenger rail. Especially in this moment, when our economic recovery and environmental future are top of mind, rail is a tool that could address multiple national goals. It will get people back to work and help build more resilient and sustainable transportation systems.

Freight railroads offer similar benefits, from jobs and growth to efficiency. Across Delaware they take 1.2 million trucks off our roads every year. We will need more freight to move by rail as consumer demand increases over the next

several decades — and that's not just from the perspective of an I-95 driver.

In a recent report, researchers at the think tank Third Way urged Congress to enact policies that shift freight "away from more carbon-intensive modes like trucking and aircraft and towards rail." Just a 10% shift would cut GHG emissions by 17 million tons annually. The Biden administration should do what it can to harness the strengths of freight rail.

Believe it or not, harnessing freight rail doesn't start with money. Freight railroads, like the seven large, Class 1 and short line railroads that extend from Wilmington down through the Delmarva Peninsula, are private companies

spending nearly all private funds on their networks. Railroading is capital intensive, and rail-served Delaware businesses, like those in our thriving poultry industry, depend on efficient lines to keep them competitive.

What freight railroads need most is sensible oversight that allows them to keep investing in their infrastructure. A current threat to private sector investment in rail is "forced switching," a policy currently under consideration at the U.S. Surface Transportation Board. It would allow the STB to force one railroad to let a competitor railroad use its track to service the competitor's customers.

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This would be like requiring one restaurant to let a competitor serve customers at its tables—and potentially leave its own customers seatless.

Forced switching could have negative consequences across the U.S. rail network. At best it would add enormous complexity to rail switching operations,

disrupting millions of carloads of traffic and exacerbating existing supply chain challenges. At worst, it could undermine freight railroads' infrastructure spending and the long-term viability of our rail lines.

Amtrak weighed in against forced switching when the policy was last considered, writing that the resulting network congestion "could adversely affect Amtrak trains." On the NEC especially, Amtrak is concerned that disruptions to freight train operations could degrade its

service and jeopardize future growth.

Not to mention the long-term worry, also echoed by Amtrak, that overly burdensome regulatory changes, forced switching or otherwise, could make freight railroads less able to fund capital investments. This creates a cycle of disinvestment that makes rail less attractive to shippers and pushes freight to highways.

The U.S. rail network — both passenger and freight — will be a powerfully important tool as we simultaneously con-

front the challenges of climate change and continued economic recovery. As President Biden has said, his administration is making investments in passenger rail to "get America back on track." They should extend this wisdom to freight, most notably by challenging outmoded policies that would hamper rail investment. Let's make sure we keep the trains running through Wilmington and across the nation.

John Shwed is mayor of the Town of Laurel.

by John Shwed, Mayor of Laurel, Delaware

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