Let Amtrak be the route to easing traffic

By Vukan R. Vuchic

To meet the growing demand for travel, new high-speed rail lines are being built in 15 industrialized countries, from France and Germany to Japan. The demand for intercity railroads in our country also is obvious: Amtrak maintains healthy ridership despite limited service and high fares.

The threat of terrorism since Sept. 11 clearly points to the need for reduced dependency on air travel, and shows the advantages of using different modes for intercity travel.

However, in the United States, Amtrak not only lacks clear policy support for a passenger rail system, but has been the target of attacks. While Congress and the Bush administration quickly approved $15 billion in emergency aid for airlines after Sept. 11 (equal to more than half of all federal funding for Amtrak in 30 years), they struggled to find $209 million for emergency assistance to Amtrak.

In the 1950s, there was a consensus that the country needed an interstate highway system. Congress devised sources of revenue, and the system was built. Amtrak's powerful enemies have taken the opposite approach: criticize Amtrak's inefficiencies and try to stop its funding, while ignoring the need for a national passenger rail system.

From its beginnings in 1971, Amtrak has been financed so inadequately that it has operated near bankruptcy. Having inherited an obsolete system, antiquated labor rules, and less than full support from the freight railroads whose tracks it uses, Amtrak has never been able to meet the country's need for attractive, high-speed railroads.

Using British railway privatization as a model, Congress in 1997 founded the Amtrak Reform Council. Congress charged the council with overseeing Amtrak's "glide path to self-sufficiency"—covering operating costs from fares—by 2002.

For Amtrak, this was totally unrealistic. "Self-sufficiency" cannot be achieved by any passenger railway in the world, nor by our highway system, with this accounting method.

Since 1997, the British privatization model has resulted in major accidents, breakdown of services, and bankruptcy for the owners of the railroad tracks. The Amtrak Reform Council—whose membership includes several enemies of passenger rail—recommended breaking up Amtrak. It perpetuated the myth that the problem is Amtrak, rather than misguided national policies. It is easy to criticize Amtrak's service, but no other organization could operate successfully receiving only 1 percent of federal transportation funds.

What is the solution?
1. Reaffirm as federal policy that the country needs an efficient national passenger rail system, one that provides reliable transportation independent of congested highways and airways.
2. Further develop cooperation with states such as California and Oregon, which have separate contracts with Amtrak, while retaining Amtrak as a national system.
3. Make major organizational improvements to Amtrak. Amtrak president David Gunn, who has a record of turning around large transit systems such as those in Philadelphia, New York City, Washington and Toronto, has started this process.
4. Create a plan for stable and adequate federal financing for Amtrak. Like highways, this may consist of allocations from the general budget, or a "nickel per gallon for Amtrak" gasoline tax.

Various cost-cutting possibilities also could exist if Amtrak worked closely with state governments and privatized some services.

The Bush administration should join with congressional leaders to create a modern national rail system. It would provide comfortable, congestion-free intercity transportation that would complement auto and air travel.

Vukan R. Vuchic (vuchic@seas.upenn.edu) is professor of transportation systems engineering at the University of Pennsylvania.