

Why we cannot get there from here: Trains and light rail

[Commentary by Mike Durham](#)

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*Editor's Note: This is the final in a two-part series on rail in the Valley. Part 1, "An old law of physics still works," appeared in the Nov. 29 issue of the **Ahwatukee Foothills News**.*

So, let us say you want to take a train from the intersection of the rain tracks by Kyrene and Ray roads to Tucson or Los Angeles.

There is no passenger service there, but the railroads do move freight on that track. It would seem easy to get some old Los Angeles Metro passenger cars, attach an engine and run it back and forth to Tucson. Right? Read on.

Union Pacific representative Zoe Richmond says the infrastructure expansion currently involving railways is to handle freight, where rail companies made money due to the increased costs of fuel.

Arizona's rail system severely lags in planning and implementation. Europe and many U.S. cities depend on sophisticated interconnected rail systems for travel among city or county regions. Phoenix and Tucson need the heavier style Metrolink passenger rail, which connects counties and other nearby states.

Arizona does not have the statutes to govern passenger railways. Passenger rail service laws are a body of law in Illinois separated from those laws that govern railways. Transportation districts guide passenger rail there. Light rail legislation here by comparison is an experiment. Statutory authority with railroad land grants and rights needs to be resolved here.

For background on the future of passenger rail service, go to the Maricopa Association of Governments' Web site (www.mag.maricopa.gov). Read the very informative "MAG Commuter Rail Plan," dated April 9, 2008. The implementation step schedule takes the plan into the year 2015.

Planning by the Arizona Department of Transportation for passenger rail service is not completed. ADOT's Tim Tait graciously and quickly updated me on the status of ADOT's "Intercity Passenger Rail Strategic Plan - 2008." It is being prepared now.

Tait had the courage to say that "it is important to note that implementation of such a concept is not currently funded. "

Let's talk about funding. Eric Emmert, executive director of the Southwest Corridor Rail Coalition, can see the funding issue writing on the wall. He reports that a \$1 million grant to study passenger rail service is sitting because matching funds are needed to execute the grant. The Legislature may not be a resource for the matching funds. With the exclusion of the TIME initiative from the last [election](#), the "rail time fund" was never created.

Funding is a mess. A new underpass in Queen Creek was recently constructed for around \$40 million dollars. An overpass without rerouting other roads costs around \$20 million dollars. Far too many rail crossings were allowed to simply intersect with surface roads. The rail crossings at McClintock Drive and Rural Road exemplify traffic volume management considerations as compared to underpasses at Mill Road or Country Club Drive in Mesa.

Citizens received promises repeatedly about solutions for transportation congestion and avoiding dependence on foreign oil. The products of those promises are questionable. MAG's targeted completion year is about two oil crises, two presidential campaigns, two gubernatorial and four legislative elections away.

Don't buy your rail commuter tickets yet.

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