

Decline of Railroads an Example Of Poor Government Management

THERE are 28 cities in Oklahoma with populations of 10,000 or more. You can reach four of them by passenger train.

Amtrak, the government-operated rail passenger system, also stops at four towns of less than 10,000 but hundreds of others have no rail service, not even a slow freight.

If passenger trains should cease to operate in the state, as is being threatened, most Oklahomans would hardly notice the difference. Only a small percentage have ridden a train in a decade and most probably haven't even seen one.

Amid the clamor for nationalization of oil, agriculture, energy, big business and small business, railroads are an example of the inability of government to run businesses that essentially are functions of free enterprise.

Railroad passenger service went into a tailspin after World War II, when declining usage and revenue resulted from a combination of factors that made a bad situation worse. By 1970, virtually all passenger systems were in financial trouble.

It was then that Congress enacted a subsidy plan to keep some lines running. Railroads would pay Amtrak fixed amounts of money, services or equipment to run their passenger trains, taking stock or tax deductions as compensation.

The Secretary of Transportation cut back on trains and services and put Amtrak into operation. Now, five years later, operating deficits exceed a billion dollars and further cutbacks are planned.

It looks as if Amtrak will drop half of its remaining 38 routes, leaving service available only between a few of the largest cities. Oklahoma trains would be discontinued.

It doesn't take a lot of business expertise to comprehend that you don't build up passenger patronage by cutting down on the number of places that you can go. Poorer service and more convenient alternatives are what wrecked the trains.

Railroad passenger problems began in the 1920s and 1930s, when railroad moguls discovered that hauling freight was more profitable than hauling people. Their emphasis shifted.

About the same time, railroad unions figured out that if they could force railroads to put two men on each job, there would be more jobs and more pay. They did and costs went up.

Congress enacted laws supporting the unions, giving railroads additional excuses for cutting back on services and avoiding improvement of equipment and facilities to meet fierce competition that was developing on highways and in the air.

With a clear track, railroads could be a good way to travel, but they aren't. Traffic is heavy between Oklahoma City and Dallas-Fort Worth, but to make the trip by train, it would be necessary to go down one day and come back another.

You can make the same trip both ways the same day by bus or car, even with speed limits set at 55 miles an hour, or by plane, with the Metroplex airport a long way from downtown.

This cutback could be the end of the line for railroad passengers. It may be too late to save the trains!