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Gray Chynoweth: Why NH really needs commuter rail: business growth



When people debate whether they are for or against rail, they often default to economics. In the past, rail was cheaper than driving and so people took trains. Today, through mass manufacturing and extensive investments in infrastructure, it is less expensive to drive. As this is unlikely to change any time soon, many end the conversation there. Yet doing so fails to take into account the most important factor: economic productivity.

We live in the golden era of efficiency. As an American society, we move so fast and with such purpose we've evolved to communicate with Twitter or text in 140-character bursts. Amazon gets you anything on two days' notice. Websites must take milliseconds to load or are relegated to history.

And yet, here we are staring at the bumper in front of us, dropping productive minutes on the road while we sit in our cars. The average American, according to U.S. Census numbers in 2011, wastes about an hour a day without Internet while commuting in a car.

A long commute to the office was annoying in the days before the mobile workforce. But now, when your office is literally in your pocket, it is unacceptable. The advent of technology has made every moment an opportunity to be productive. We all know this. That is why people risk their lives daily to send a text or an email from their mobile phones while speeding down the highway at 75 mph (or cause accidents while texting during bumper to bumper commutes).

And this is where the argument shifts in favor of the most popular way of getting to and from work with a cellphone in your hand: commuter rail.

Let's look at the economics. Current estimates are that more than 3,100 people a day would use commuter rail between Boston, Nashua and Manchester, a drive that on a good day takes two hours round trip. The average hourly salary in New Hampshire is \$23.20. This means that the non-Internet enabled commute costs us more than \$37 million a year in lost worker productivity.

But beyond the straightforward economics, New Hampshire needs commuter rail for another reason: accessing Massachusetts-based urban talent.

Once upon a time, New Hampshire businesses could count on a growing population to meet their recruiting needs. Once upon a time, younger workers raised on TV shows and movies such as "Escape from New York," "Law & Order" and "Hill Street Blues" were fleeing crime-ridden urban centers to places like Southern New Hampshire to grow companies like DEC. Times have changed.

According to work by the New Hampshire Center for Public Policy, New Hampshire's businesses are starving for the new, young talent they need to grow. Comparing 2000-2010 to 2011-2014, New Hampshire has seen a 90 percent drop in population growth. Further, the age of the state's population workforce has soared to the third oldest in the country while today's emerging workforce grew up in a culture that glamorized urban living with shows like "Friends," "Sex and the City" and "Seinfeld."

How do I know rail is part of the answer? Last year I went to the Boston Startup School, which helps early mid-career professionals transition to startups. At the end of a session talking about Dyn, I asked the group of about 65 people how many of them, if the right opportunity came along, would be willing to work for Dyn in Manchester. Four people raised their hands. Pathetic.

Trying to salvage the moment, I asked how many might join us if they could hop on a train at North Station and get to work in about an hour. Thirty-five hands went up. Until someone shows me better evidence, this indicates that we have an opportunity to increase Southern New Hampshire businesses' access to new talent by 800 percent.

Simply put, if businesses in Southern New Hampshire are going to grow and succeed in the future, we need a pipeline that will get folks from the core of Boston to our southern economic centers - Manchester and Nashua.

The New Hampshire economy clearly needs commuter rail.

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