

By Tod Newcombe



Interstate 84 from Hartford to Boston, thus obtaining much of the needed corridor for new dedicated tracks in one fell swoop. South of New York, a combination of new tracks and tunnels built on utility and other accessible rights of way, as well as some existing tracks, would be employed.

This work would enable trains to travel from Washington, D.C., to New York in 90 minutes instead of the current top time of two hours and 45 minutes, and trains between New York to Boston would take less than two hours instead of the current three and a half hours. The new tracks would allow for greater capacity, giving the region a broad mix of local and express trains. Smaller cities would for the first time gain from high-speed travel, while the huge boost in capacity would free up track space for commuter railroads in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Boston and New York, thus expanding their potential.

True high-speed rail service, the plan estimates, would revitalize small and large cities, concentrating growth there and helping make possible an environmentally improved and more pleasant lifestyle. The economic impact can't be understated: Faster, more reliable movement of goods and people in such a densely populated area will allow the economy of this mega-region to grow and flourish for decades to come.

Of course, this is just a plan from a graduate school class. But both Yaro and Taylor are key players in regional and national planning, and top professionals from the United States and Great Britain were included on the project. Taylor and Yaro hope their study will influence the formal studies being conducted.

There is no question that the Northeast has the need, demand and potential for true high-speed rail, and given what's at stake, the price tags being thrown around—from \$50 billion to \$100 billion—are not that large.

Maybe it's time to do it, just like those other things people thought couldn't be done. **G**

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Beyond the Stacks

Like so many other public-sector services caught up in this recession, libraries have seen demand for their services rise dramatically while budget cuts have forced them to make painful reductions in the very services the public wants. In particular, local governments are reducing operating hours. According to a recent study by the American Library Association (ALA), nearly one-quarter of urban libraries are reporting fewer hours in 2009, compared to a 15 percent reduction for libraries overall.

These cutbacks come when libraries are no longer used for simply checking out books and other types of media material. Some libraries, especially in urban areas, now offer social services and health-care assistance, and provide a vast array of resources and tools for job hunting and improving work skills. They have become islands of public safety, providing a safe and educational haven for children and teens after the school day ends. They also are e-government hubs—82 percent of libraries provide Wi-Fi, and 67 percent report that they are the only provider of free public access to computers and the Internet in their community, according to the ALA.

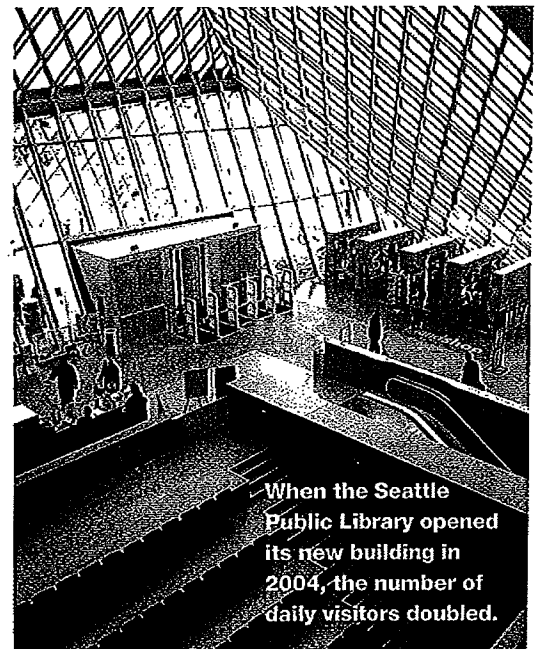
Heading into the second decade of the 21st century, the urban library has become America's knowledge center. "The problem is that many leaders think of libraries as they existed in the 1960s and '70s," says Susan Benton, CEO of the Urban Libraries Council. One idea the council would like local officials to consider is the notion of the urban library as a magnet for economic development. The concept is not new, but has taken on importance as some question the direct cost of running libraries. When the Seattle Public Library opened a striking new building in 2004, the number of daily visitors doubled, attracting thousands of people to the city's downtown.

Not every city can build a glittering jewel of a library to attract visitors, but many have put branches in existing malls and other high-traffic locations. By keeping the number of operating hours high, these mall libraries have become extremely popular and by extension, also have brought more people to the shops.

Libraries that anchor new development also have taken hold. Library executives and developers notice that putting a library into mixed use, retail and residential areas brings numerous advantages. In Rockville, Md., a \$352 million redevelopment project in the downtown district includes 644 condominiums, 180,000 square feet of retail and restaurant space, and a new public library—Montgomery County's largest.

Developers like having libraries in their developments for the visitors they bring and because libraries don't compete with local businesses. While these new library structures may not invoke the familiar look of the classical Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, they continue to project the power and purpose of a very public place. **G**

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