

A train ride with Michael Dukakis

Guess what? Michael Dukakis is back. By all rights, Dukakis, who is well into his 60s and close to retirement age, should be on the chicken-dinner circuit now, reminiscing and complaining about those famous Willie Horton and Boston Harbor ads.

Instead, frustrated by the lack of investment in passenger rail in the United States, he got back on the national stage and became a board member and vice chairman of Amtrak.

A few weeks ago, Dukakis was on Amtrak train No. 67, the Twilight Shoreliner, heading from Boston to Washington, D.C., for a House of Representatives hearing on Amtrak funding. I happened to be on that evening train, too, heading back to Richmond from a week's vacation.

At first, I wasn't sure it was Dukakis. I couldn't imagine that a former presidential candidate and three-time governor of Massachusetts would be grabbing a sandwich in an Amfleet café car destined for Newport News, but there he was.

Knowing that Dukakis is on Amtrak's board, I asked him if he had a few moments to talk.

He introduced me to James P. RePass, president of the National Corridors Initiative, a group that is lobbying for improved rail corridors across the country. Of late, RePass has been involved with trying to pass a \$12 billion federal bill that would upgrade Amtrak's capital spending. The bills are in committee right now.

It is not a good time for Amtrak. The company has just mortgaged New York's Penn Station for operating funds, and Amtrak President George Warrington has said that the railroad will have to consider layoffs to avoid cutting routes.

Dukakis said his interest in transportation issues was first aroused when Massachusetts debated a 1960s plan to build new interstate highways in and out of Boston. The plan would not only have run through thousands of houses, but it would have destroyed the city's neighborhoods.

With only five friends — who he called the “most progressive friends in the planning profession” — the movement against the plan grew and they stopped the freeway system from going forward. Even better, the state won the right to invest some highway funds in rail.

As he travels, Dukakis sees a populace that is stuck in airports or in traffic jams. People are interested in improved rail, but the politicians have been slow to catch on.

“There's political gold in this position,” said Dukakis. “People love trains. It's just a helluva pleasant way to travel.”

Dukakis said that whatever the criticisms, Amtrak is doing better than most commercial airlines, with the exception of Southwest. He said that while some observers have focused on the fact that Amtrak will not break even before the congressionally imposed deadline next year, many of the costs

that Amtrak bears are long term, including millions in employee pensions that the government would be forced to honor if Amtrak shut down.

“The pension is a part of the so-called Amtrak loss,” Dukakis said.

This year, Amtrak expects to lose \$59 million, down from \$319 million in 1999. Dukakis

said that if you look at subsidies for highways and airports, the cost of rail doesn't even come close.

Dukakis praised Virginia's Republican leadership. He said that both of Virginia's senators, as well as the Gilmore administration, have given strong support to passenger rail, even though it's not traditionally a Republican issue.

Dukakis also had high praise for Virginia's two freight railroads, Richmond-based CSX Corp and Norfolk-based Norfolk Southern. While there were tremendous problems in the split-up of Conrail, which hurt Amtrak's on-time performance, Dukakis said that Norfolk Southern and CSX were cooperating with Amtrak far better than other railroads.

I told him of Virginia's hope to get rail corridors upgraded by 2007 so that tourists won't have to suffer clogged interstates to see Williamsburg and Jamestown. Dukakis recalled a similar situation in 1976, when a group of Cambridge architects proposed that instead of spending money on the Bicentennial, money should be earmarked for improving the rail corridors and service between the original 13 colonies.

“Why [didn't] the federal government make the investment to dramatically upgrade the rail corridors that link the 13 original colonies?” asked Dukakis. “With a single ticket, you could have ridden to your heart's content.”

Dukakis said he is not a train fanatic. Instead, he believes that if more people take trains for short trips, it will free up thousands of slots at U.S. airports. As an example, Dukakis said that on a recent trip from Crete to the States, it took longer to fly from JFK airport to Boston than it took to get from Greece to the United States.

He said that in places like Chicago, there are already discussions of spending billions of tax dollars on a third airport.

“There is only a finite amount of airspace,” Dukakis said. “We are gumming it up with this kind of stuff.” □



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