

The Spirit of Washington Dinner Train, which runs along the threatened Seattle line, on the east side of Lake Washington.



OUR TRANSPORT POLICIES ARE NUTS

Strategic rail corridors falling into disuse, airline meals on long flights that consist of just a bag of nuts – who comes up with these ideas? asks Michael R Weinman

As this column was undergoing its preliminary massage and contemplation, a 21 November article from the major Seattle newspaper, the *Post-Intelligencer*, by Bill Virgin, crossed my desk.

Those who have been in the beautiful Seattle area know that the east side of Lake Washington, famous as Microsoft headquarters territory, is heavily suburbanised, yet contains several regional centres that are transportation and population service hubs. Its economic force ranges from aircraft giant Boeing at the south end, to wineries on the north, and it is, of course, the seat of a major technology industry, which blankets the region.

The combination of economic potency, natural beauty and the draw of Seattle across the lake to the west makes this a growth area in dire need of both east-west and north-south transportation enhancements. Only slightly further afield, port activities, food and lumber origins and the termini of several east-west transcontinental rail routes, and the California-Oregon-Washington-Canada freight corridor, make the metropolitan area a vital node in America's freight railway network. Recent improvements to corridor passenger and commuter service focused on Seattle have seen

dramatic increases in rail ridership. Finally, Seattle is now constructing the second link in what may become a regional light rail system – a north-south downtown-to-airport line, west of the lake.

However, in all the plans for improved passenger and freight rail service, a line which meanders along the east side of Lake Washington, formerly a Northern Pacific branch, now owned by Burlington Northern Santa Fe, has been largely ignored. It is largely used for minor industry shunting, except at the south end where it serves the huge Boeing plant at Renton. It also carries a privately operated dinner tour train.

The fact that its connections at both ends make it a natural bypass for west side main lines, and that its right of way could be a vital link in any public transportation improvements on the east side, are equally ignored. Its unsignalled single track is a remnant of a period when this was purely rural territory. The line parallels a major motorway – and is now threatened by additional motorway construction. Worse, as Bill Virgin points out, it is now in the sights of those who would convert it to a recreational trail, devoid of transportation purpose.

Now, in the annals of metropolitan miscues, allowing this corridor to be expunged from the

roles of transportation solutions, in an era of expensive fuel, oppressive congestion, and as columnist Virgin reports, potentially catastrophic impediments to established main routes, is clearly in the 'top 10'. So often this view from across the pond is that of frustration occasioned by an action already taken. In this case, however, the view of impending debacle is clear – but is hardly as inspiring! Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it...

Now, among those other tidbits being mulled over before the Pacific Northwest pre-empted this column, a few interesting developments of recent note. *Railway Age* in October quoted TTX (the huge freight car owner) president and CEO Andrew F Reardon as saying that a TTX rule of thumb was that every 10 cent increase in the price of a gallon of diesel fuel results in 50,000 loads diverted from truck to freight train in the US. That alone should halt the line-lifting advocates!

Then there was the quote from Eurostar's Richard Brown, in a recent *Modern Railways*, who cited his own rule of thumb that a one per cent rise in punctuality gives a one per cent boost to business travel. While this may apply to a tightly controlled system in a cocooned environment, it has been our experience that punctuality starts as a transparent factor in modal choice – it is only when it dips markedly that it becomes a 'friction factor'. And this is tempered by the competitive mode-against-mode scheduling which itself is being contorted by airline security and highway congestion impacts. Comparing punctuality of many US passenger routes is an exercise in frustration, since the base schedules may be hours slower than those prevailing 80 years ago!

And finally there is the quote from John Grogan of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* of 3 November. '... I found myself on a flight from Pennsylvania to Texas [thrice the Penzance-Aberdeen mileage]...counting the contents of my in-flight snack... My "premium blend" power snack consisted of exactly nine and a half soy nuts, five and a quarter sesame sticks and five lonely mini-pretzels. Together, this gastronomic feast totalled a whopping one-half ounce. Bon appetit, passengers! Isn't it nice to know the airlines are doing their part to address the national obesity epidemic?' And to our knowledge, no US airline has thus far pledged a substantial premium to the DfT!

If readers could take in the view of this side of the pond, they would see this columnist sitting at his computer, shaking his head in utter disbelief that the column he has just written is neither fiction nor fantasy. Oh, when will we ever learn?

Michael R Weinman is head of PTSI Transportation, USA, a railway management consultancy. He is a former officer of New York Central, Penn Central and Amtrak.