

New England States May Form Rail Alliance

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The lieutenant governors of Rhode Island and Massachusetts pledged Thursday to partner with Connecticut in a regional mass transportation alliance aimed at securing the "connectivity" deemed key to New England's economic vitality.

State Sen. President Pro Tem Donald E. Williams Jr., D-Brooklyn, was the chairman of the inaugural Southern New England States' Transportation Summit at the Capitol in Hartford.

Williams said "looking beyond state borders" is critical to rebuilding New England's public transportation system and strengthening each state and the region.

Jim RePass, the president of the National Corridors Initiative, a railroad advocacy group, said New England's "economic competitiveness" is threatened because of sub-par rail service. He urged the states to work together to rehabilitate both passenger and freight service.

RePass said the federal government has historically under-funded rail in favor of highway and aviation infrastructure.

"The New England states must start working together," he warned.

Lt. Gov. Timothy P. Murray of Massachusetts agreed.

He said enhancing regional mass transportation will succeed only if "every state, across party lines, is working day to day on this issue."

"Rail has become an essential part of the transportation mix," Murray said. "We have to do better. This coalition here today can help us in that regard. We have to have this level of cooperation."

House Speaker James A. Amman, D-Milford, said Connecticut must enhance mass transit to combat chronic roadway congestion and foster economic growth.

"It's essential we work with our neighboring states," Amman said. "New England cannot afford to become an economic cul-de-sac."

Lt. Gov. Elizabeth Roberts of Rhode Island suggested each state bring its transportation commissioner and business leaders to the next summit.

"We need to think more creatively, looking at a broader geographic region," she said.

Kip Bergstrom, the executive director of Rhode Island's Economic Policy Council, said a high-speed commuter rail service could create a lucrative New York-Boston super region.

Bergstrom envisions a rail service where those living in Connecticut can reach Manhattan or Boston in one hour.

"We have to find a way to win the innovation game," said Bergstrom, who has a master's degree in city and regional planning from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

"Connecticut should be the biggest cheerleader for high-speed rail. The gatekeepers will live in Connecticut," he said.

Peter Ruane, president of the American Road and Transportation Builders Association, said the New England transportation crisis has still not been "recognized" by the federal government.

"We have a huge public education challenge on a national scale," Ruane said. "The federal government has to play a huge role in finance and policy."

In closing the summit, Amman was upbeat. "It's going to be the beginning of a great relationship between all of us," Amman said. "We hope in the future that all roads will lead to New England."

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