

# Railing Against Fuel Costs

by Livia Gershon

Cost of diesel means good times for freight trains

With diesel topping \$4 a gallon and trucking prices rising accordingly, it looks to some people like boom time for trains.

Freight is already a cheaper form of transportation than trucks, and according to the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission's 2007 Regional Transportation Plan, railroads can move a ton of freight three times as far as a truck on a gallon of fuel.

## Chugging Along

"Rail has no place to go but be more and more attractive," said Jack Healy, director of operations at the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership and a member of the board at Worcester-based Providence & Worcester Railroad Co.

But while some players in the railroad industry see anecdotal evidence of companies switching to rail transport, others say a significant shift in that direction is unlikely without some major improvements in the area's rail system.

## Tons And Tons

The sheer amount of stuff that moves from place to place can be mind-boggling. In 2002, 110 million tons of freight were moved from one part of Massachusetts to another, almost all of it by truck, according to the CMRPC report. Meanwhile, 85 million tons came into the state and 42 million left. On the national level, the total distance traveled by trucks nearly doubled between 1980 and 2002, and by 2020 the total volume of freight is expected to be 70 percent higher than it was in 1998.

That means more congestion on the highway, and it means there may be an opportunity for railroads. According to the CMRPC numbers, trains carried only 3 percent of the freight transported in the state in 2002.

Like Healy, James **Coull** of industrial and commercial developer JM Coull Inc. in Maynard sees trains as a solution to several problems. Not only do they avoid some of the expense and pollution associated with diesel fuel, but they take trucks off the congested roads. And, **Coull** said, they avoid another problem associated with the trucking industry - a shortage of young people interested in long-distance driving.



*A Providence & Worcester Railroad locomotive in the company's maintenance yard.*



*Intransit's yard on Wisner Ave in Worcester.*

## Increasing Attraction

Speaking at a recent meeting about industry in North Central Massachusetts, Bonnie Biocchi, a regional director for the Massachusetts Office of Business Development, said she is beginning to see more companies listing rail spurs as one of their criteria for setting up shop in a new location. But Richard A. Rydant, a project manager at the CMRPC, said it's

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much harder than it once was to find a property with direct access to a rail line. Many old factory sites have been redeveloped as big box stores or housing developments, leaving rail spurs inaccessible.

**Coull** is currently working with Converted Organics Inc., a Boston-based company that turns food waste into fertilizer. The company is considering converting an old furniture mill into a production facility simply because it's close to a rail line. **Coull** said the company's customers are mainly on the west coast, and the long distance makes rail shipping an attractive option.

The Gardner site has an old rail spur, which would allow the company to load material directly into train cars. But that spur is so old it's unusable. To rehabilitate it would be expensive and the volume Converted Organic plans to ship wouldn't justify the cost, **Coull** said.

"These parcels that are well-situated for rail access, they're starting to evaporate," Rydant said.

And when companies don't have direct access to the train tracks, they need to use a multi-part "intermodal" process to get their products moved, trucking them from a starting point to a train and from the train to the end point. **Coull** said a train may be able to get a product to Chicago in two days, just like a truck, but it probably won't get it to the customer's doorstep as fast.

"The biggest drawback to rail, frankly, is delivery times," he said.

Steve Cotrone, president of Intransit Container Inc. of Worcester, which specializes in intermodal transfer for products that are imported or exported, disputes the idea that train transport is slower than trucks. He said the industry has been getting more efficient in recent years, and in some cases loads are now delivered within an hour of a train's arrival.

"Rail is becoming more efficient but it doesn't go everywhere," he said. "That's the main problem."

And some routes simply aren't set up to accommodate the kinds of freight that companies want to ship today. Moving automobiles and certain other kinds of freight requires more clearance on bridges and underpasses than some tracks provide.

P&W has been working to correct those issues in some areas, according to Marie Angelini, the company's general counsel. She said the company rehabilitated track from Willimantic, Conn. to Plainfield, Conn. last year to allow for the transportation of "over-dimensional traffic" including racks of automobiles piled up in two or three levels.

### Public Support

That project was done entirely with private money, but some others, like a recent P&W rail improvement effort in Rhode Island, have used some state and federal funding.

Rydant said Massachusetts is behind some other states, including New York and Pennsylvania, in offering public support to the rail system. He said the state is beginning to update a rail plan, which has not been done since 1989, and he hopes the new version will call for more funding for freight rail.

But even bringing Massachusetts' level of support up to that of other states may be too little too late. Chalmers Hardenbergh of Maine, an advocate for the freight rail system who publishes a newsletter popular within the industry, is less optimistic about the future of rail than many in the local area. Part of the problem, he said, is that the trucking industry is massively subsidized by the tax dollars spent on highways, while there is no such support for trains.

"It seems to me if we gave the railways money to improve their service or cut their rates we could be saving our highways and at the same time seeing the other benefits we get from getting trucks off our highways," he said.

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