

Hearing on Rail Passenger Transportation Services

Testimony

of

C.Jack Ellis, Mayor
City of Macon, Georgia

Presented

December 6, 2000

To the

U.S. Congressional Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation

Senator Cleland, Governor Barnes, Secretary Slater and my fellow mayors, I am C. Jack Ellis, Mayor of the City of Macon, Ga. I appreciate the opportunity to present testimony this afternoon in support of high-speed rail in Georgia in general and between the City of Atlanta and the City of Macon, in particular.

Needs and Opportunities

There are many reasons that I believe that a high-speed rail system would be good for our state. First, everyday hundreds of Maconites and residents of the Middle Georgia region make the approximate 180-mile drive round trip to Atlanta to take advantage of the many employment opportunities in the metro Atlanta area. Many other residents in the middle Georgia region make the same trip at least once during the week to conduct business in the Atlanta area; enjoy Atlanta's cultural, entertainment venues; see doctors; attend classes or engage in other activities. While not in the same volume, yet, residents of the metro Atlanta area are increasingly travelling to Macon and the middle Georgia region for some of the same reasons.

High-speed rail would provide a more efficient, reliable and safer mode of transportation than is currently available to those who must travel between these two centers of our state; and it would do so in a manner that would be more environmental friendly. In addition, high-speed rail would provide increased mobility for students, senior citizens, disabled persons and other non-driving populations in these areas of our state. The result would be improved mobility and access to the Atlanta for thousands of the state's citizens who currently spend countless hours in their automobiles to get to their destination, which causes traffic congestion and degrades our air quality.

Second, I support high-speed rail because it will help make us as a nation less dependent on foreign oil supplies. The increased gasoline prices several months ago because of supply cut backs by OPEC was a rude awakening to us of our vulnerability in this regard and made us aware once again (as we were made aware in the 1970's) of the adverse impact that such dependency can have on us economically. For example, the average price of a gallon of regular gas before the price hikes was approximately \$0.90.

Currently, it is approximately \$1.40. For the Macon or middle Georgia resident that must drive between Macon and Atlanta, as well as other Americans who lack alternative forms of effective and efficient transportation, this represents a reduction in their standard of living that many can least afford. An Editorial in the Monday's edition of the Atlanta Constitution makes the point that as the cost of transportation increases, less is left to spend on "health care, food, entertainment and personal care products and services—quality of life expenditures."

Third, high-speed rail would improve Georgia's ability to compete in the global market place. Through connecting the state's metropolitan regions, high-speed rail would allow Georgia to be viewed as one seamless market by companies desiring to do business in the state. After flying into Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport, businesses would have efficient and effective transportation via high-speed rail (a mode of Transportation that is quite common throughout Europe) to the other commercial centers of the state.

High-speed rail connecting Atlanta and Macon also has the potential to serve another important strategic national objective—relieving the congestion at the nation's busiest airports. In the state of Georgia, we are blessed with the busiest airport in the World—the Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport. However, like many airports around the country, in order for Hartsfield to continue to accommodate growth in passenger air transportation, it must expand. Such expansion is expensive and it can be disruptive to surrounding neighborhoods and communities. In addition, the expansion will take several years to complete. For example, Atlanta is about to undertake the construction of the Fifth Runway project to relieve some of the congestion Hartsfield is experiencing. However, it will be five to six years before this project is completed and the relief can be provided. The congestion cries out for a solution today. I believe that the City of Macon can be a major part of the solution to Hartsfield's growing pains in the short-term. In the City of Macon, we are in the process updating our airport master plan and undertaking an approximately two million renovation of our airport terminal building. Currently, we have sufficient runway capacity to accommodate smaller jet traffic and we will be seeking funding to expand the capacity of our runways to handle larger jets. High-speed rail between Atlanta and Macon would enable the state to optimize the use of an underutilized existing resource to help solve the air traffic congestion at Hartsfield, which is of local, regional and national interest.

Fourth, and extremely important to us in the Macon and middle Georgia region, high-speed rail supports Governor Barnes' *One Georgia Initiative*. High-speed rail has the potential to make Governor Barnes vision of making economic opportunity accessible to all of Georgia a reality. Because of its central location in our state, I believe that the City of Macon is uniquely and strategically positioned to be the conduit through which economic growth and development can be generated and made accessible to the far reaches of the middle and southern part of our state. Macon is the shopping, medical, banking, educational and cultural center of the Middle Georgia region. In addition, Macon is the second largest rail hub in the Southeast; and we are the last stop on the proposed Southeast Corridor.

As part of the *One Georgia Initiative*, the state has already begun to build a foundation for this growth and development in this region the state. These include the Secretary of State Office building, the Georgia Sports and Music halls of fame, the State's Agricultural Center in Perry, Georgia. We in Macon and Middle Georgia appreciate these developments and we applaud our State officials for their commitment to the *One Georgia Initiative*. High-speed rail will ensure that the returns on these investments by the State are maximized; and it will make more palpable the transfer of additional state offices and institutions to the Macon and the Middle Georgia region. As future decisions are made regarding the location of government offices and institutions, we encourage the State, as well as the Federal government, to give favorable consideration to Macon and the Middle Georgia region.

Challenges

As with all opportunities, there are challenges that must be overcome for the opportunities to be realized. Some of the challenges that I believe must be overcome to make high-speed rail in Georgia a reality are as follows:

- The system must be designed and built in a manner that makes it an attractive alternative to the automobile commute. In this regard, the system of high-speed rail must have the following elements:
 - Competitive fares

- Travel time that is comparable to the commute via automobile
 - Connection to a seamless inter-modal system on each end of the Atlanta-Macon high-speed corridor. To the extent feasible, the objective should be to have a one-fare system so that a passenger may go from one mode of transportation to another without the inconvenience of multiple ticketing.
- Consummating an agreement with Norfolk Southern to share use of their existing rail.
 - Upgrading rail crossings in a timely manner.

Funding Concerns

As regards funding, I would ask that the following concerns be considered:

- In the City of Macon/Bibb County and the State of Georgia are working together to create a waterfront in the Downtown Macon that will include the Ocmulgee Heritage Greenway (a seven mile riverwalk) and a multi-million mixed used development. The Norfolk Southern H line that runs between downtown and the water's edge blocks effective access to the Ocmulgee River's southern riverfront and poses as a barrier to this development. The waterfront development is seen as an opportunity to create significant economic catalysts in the revitalization of the historical, cultural and economic Center City of the region.

Fortunately, an unprecedented window of opportunity has opened. FTA and G-DOT propose to redevelop and expand the I16/I75 interchange and widen I-16. At the same time, the Program Management Team is considering this part of the Norfolk Southern 'H' Line as an entranceway for inter-city passenger rail from Atlanta to Macon. The late Frank Pinkston requested that G-DOT prepare an alternative concept of the I 75/I-16 expansion that would include the relocation of these two miles of railroad. Senator Cleland has been appraised of the initiative and even the late Senator Coverdale expressed support for the relocation in one of his last letters written to us. Chairman Justice and I have requested of Harry Dixon his support of a relocation feasibility study. Roy Fickling has requested that GRPA consult with G-DOT about the mutual benefits of relocation, and recently Tommy Olmstead, our new Chairman of the

County Commission, has pledged his support and will use his influence for support from the State. Moreover, very importantly, Norfolk Southern has described itself as open to the possibility.

G-DOT through Moreland-Altobelli did suggest a futuristic concept that would reroute the rail 26 miles around Macon but would be many years in development with significant expense. The two-mile relocation across the river was never in G-DOT's scope of work or budget; therefore, feasibility and expense were not quantified. Hence, our request of the State for the study. The feasibility and cost estimates will include both rail relocation and road modifications to accommodate the rail. At Senator Cleland's recent "Smart Growth Task Force," Governor Barnes ably described the importance of "synthesis" in transportation and land use planning. The Macon community, through NewTown Macon, has asked the Governor to consider a detailed study by Moreland-Altobelli to estimate the feasibility and cost to relocate two miles of Norfolk Southern 'H' line railroad that blocks effective access to the Ocmulgee River's southern riverfront in the heart of our city. This proposal requests a detailed study of the relocation of the rail line to the opposite or north side of the river, integrating the new rail line with G-DOT and FTA's planned expansion of the I-16 interstate. By quantifying the cost, the study will provide guidance to evaluate the cost/benefits of the relocation and effectively weigh the financing alternatives. This smart growth strategy will allow those given the responsibilities of improving both transportation and land use in our city, county, region, state and nation the opportunity to pool resources and expertise to insure wise development along Macon and Middle Georgia's birth canal, the Ocmulgee River.

If this two miles of rail were relocated, the result would do nothing less than transform our city forever. The expense and complications should be seen from the perspective of Middle Georgians today and the many future generations whose quality of life and economic opportunities will be improved. The relocation of the active rail allows a "rails to trails" for the Ocmulgee Heritage Greenway, our 7 mile river-walk, spurs economic development for our public-private partnerships' \$25 Million mixed-use Riverside Development, and improves access to one of Georgia's greatest natural resources, the Ocmulgee River. In addition, there are other benefits of relocation, such as improved freight and possible passenger rail efficiency.

- Extend the high-speed line from Macon to the Macon Regional Airport. The extension will support initiatives underway to attract a major air carrier to the airport and enhance its viability as a reliever airport for Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport. Initially, the extension was included, but then deleted. The extension should be re-instated.
- Rethink the use of the gas tax exclusively for road improvement. It is time we reconsidered earmarking the gas tax for a particular mode of transportation and used it to support a comprehensive transportation system that would include mass transportation, high-speed rail, as well as, road improvements. I believe that this is justified on the basis that high-speed rail will generate positive externalities that will accrue to all of our citizens. I further believe that this new perspective would be consistent with GDOT commitment to “take a fresh look at how to best to meet the transportation needs of the State of Georgia for the new millennium by updating the Statewide Transportation Plan.”
- Provide additional funding for mass transportation at the federal level. In the City of Macon, we provide an annual subsidy to our public bus system of approximately \$1.2 million. However, this is insufficient to enable our bus system to expand into the areas of our county where many of the jobs are. Public transportation to these areas is of vital importance if we are to implement successfully the Work Force Investment Initiative and Welfare-to Work.

Again, thank you for allowing me to speak today, and share with you the growing excitement Middle Georgians are developing as the opportunities of passenger rail and the related transportation oriented development are described. The Macon and Middle Georgia community plan to work together with federal, state, and regional partners, both public and private, to promote and enhance economic opportunities through passenger and freight rail, mitigate environmental emissions by implementing a viable and more efficient means of transportation, and relieve automobile congestion and actually enhance our road systems’ viability by supporting alternative forms of transportation.

I look forward to your consideration and guidance in these matters to which the continued growth and development of our state and region are intricately bound.

Supplemental Material

- *Macon Rail Station Location Study*
- *Views of Downtown Macon Development Opportunities (To be provided at hearing)*

Macon Rail Station Location Study

Criteria Discussion and Site Recommendation Draft

The Site Selection Committee *was* selected by the Commission on Macon to Atlanta Rail (COMAR) to study a recommended site to the Program Management Team. The committee met over a period of months as an ad-hoc group appointed by COMAR without standing except that it represented a cross section of the Macon community. The Program Management Team and their Rail Consultants have stated that community input will be a strong determinant in the site selection process.

The deliberations followed the criteria below which included questions of both feasibility and usefulness of the different sites. 1-8 were suggested by Parsons Brinkerhoff (see work sheet) and others were added by the committee from research from other communities with passenger rail. There were certain assumptions made to expedite the process e.g. the use of the 'Old Central of Georgia' Line, Macon's Station would be a hub vs. an end line, and the understanding that even though *the* committee included many development professionals and engineers, the discussions lacked certain technical expertise due to the Rail Consultants having just begun their work. The mission of the Site Selection Committee was to compare different sites, develop consensus on a particular site and make a recommendation to COMAR

1. **High Quality Rail Connections:** The fact that the Macon station would serve as a hub limited discussion to the existing Terminal Station site and a site ten blocks south due to the various lines converging from several directions (see attached existing rail map). The Terminal Station having served 100 arrivals a day at its peak was easily the most feasible even though some track that had been either abandoned or taken up would need redevelopment.
2. **Room for Multiple Train Storage:** Similar to the discussion above the Terminal Station provides historic multiple train storage with opportunity in the Industrial Rail Park room for a Passenger Rail Maintenance Yard in addition to the state's largest freight yard in Brosnan Yards. An argument could be made for the site ten blocks south due to its proximity to Terminal Station.
3. **Parking:** For discussion an assumption was made that adequate parking could be provided at all sites including Terminal Station in the many acres of available 'brown-field' redevelopment area behind the Station and parking opportunities associated with a proposed multi-modal station near the Terminal.
4. **Access to both Automobile and Other Transportation Modes:** If automobiles were the only consideration obviously I-75 and I-475 is most desirable with site at the end of the Proposed Fall Line also well positioned. Terminal Station and the Airport are adequate with the extension of Fall Line Freeway enhancing the Terminal's position. Considering access to other forms of transportation Terminal Station is the only qualifier with existing bus, Greyhound, and Taxi's; and proposed downtown shuttle and Multi-modal station as part of Terminal Station (see Macon-Bibb County Bus Routes attached).
5. & 6. **Ownership of Entire Site and Environmental Issues:** For discussion sake, assumptions were made that all sites were feasible.
7. **Support Services for Layovers:** The Terminal Station and Downtown Macon has

- significant advantages with this criteria.
8. **Existing Train Station:** Available Again in discussions of advantages and disadvantages of the different sites sometimes the most obvious is overlooked. The Terminal Station is a historical and cultural icon in downtown Macon; the Station is one of the most architecturally significant buildings in the region. It is also the last of the great 'Union stations' in the State of Georgia. Other sites would require the building a *station*.
 9. **Existing Statewide Rail Linkages:** Similar to the first criteria of connections, this criteria speaks to the need of existing rail that converges in a particular location which again eliminates all sites except the Terminal Station with the possible exception often blocks south which would need some redevelopment (see Existing Rail Lines).
 10. & 11. **Transportation Oriented Development and Supports Economy:** This is a question of synergism. Which location for a transportation hub would have the greatest impact on existing and future commercial and residential development? Transportation Oriented Development (TOD) is a buzzword in economic development with many examples and viable models demonstrated around the country. Even though all locations would benefit from TOD, the most significant development and redevelopment would be in and around the Terminal Station and its support of existing and future development in downtown Macon. It has been said that Terminal Station's revival as a rail hub will have the single greatest impact on the revitalization of downtown Macon, the center of the Middle Georgia Region.
 12. **Attraction of Federal Support:** This question considers opportunity for the Macon community to leverage Federal dollars for redevelopment. A case could be made for all locations but the Rail Station Foundation describes significant Federal support when involving historic train stations, multi-modal transportation facilities, and urban revitalization. The Terminal Station is the only location that would meet this criteria with the possible exception of an airport location.
 13. **Historical and Cultural Significance:** This criteria deals with part of the 'place making' opportunities or as sometimes described 'creating places worthy of our affection'. Terminal Station obviously is superior with this criteria. Return of passenger rail to this site will help resurrect Georgians love affair with passenger rail while restoring a significant part of Georgia's history and culture. Middle Georgian memories alone is a powerful marketing tool in the decision to return passenger rail to the Terminal Station.
 14. **Supports 'Livable Community' and/or 'Smart Growth' Concepts:** Literature on the subject provides support for all locations in degrees of priority. The important components of 'reuse of existing facilities and infrastructure', support of mixed-use development, 'density by design' by supporting urban centers, and the use of multi-modal and alternative transportation (other than car) gave the Terminal Station the strongest position among the locations.
 15. **Benefits the Greatest Number of People:** This criteria was used to discuss locations that would have the greatest appeal to the broadest market of rider-ship. Each location had advantages to certain areas of Middle Georgians and to certain demographic and economic strata but the central location of the Terminal Station with the multi-modal opportunities provides the strongest support using this criteria.
 16. **High Commercial Density and/or Job Clusters:** This criteria was used to distinguish locations that provided existing employment base in close proximity to the station location. Passenger rail's strongest support has come from travel associated with work and employment related travel. The downtown Terminal Station

location was the obvious choice using this criteria if concentration of employment is used.

17. **Marketable Location:** All the locations enjoyed marketing ploys that could be used in the promotion of particular attributes. But the historic Terminal Station as has been seen in other redeveloped stations that included a mix of retail, urban entertainment, access to other urban venues of hotels, shopping, museums, office, residential, medical complexes, university etc. eclipsed all other possible location alternatives.
18. **Land Use and Zoning Prerequisites:** For these discussions it was assumed all locations would meet all land use and zoning criteria.
19. **Maintain Green-space:** This speaks to the redevelopment of obsolete buildings and infrastructure that would avoid new construction in green-fields. Depending on the particulars all sites might qualify with the downtown sites definitely meeting this criteria.
20. **Hotel and Motel Rooms in Vicinity:** The Terminal Station would have the best position on this criteria with more rooms planned in the future.
21. **Physical Constraints:** This criteria might be summarized by several of the preceding criteria. All sites depending on the particulars would meet this criteria. Concerns of fast trains would in an urban setting could be mitigated at all sites with proper development
22. **Established Communications:** This would refer to access to as simple a communication link as telephone to wide band and fiber optic connections. It was agreed that these were available at the Terminal Station and possibly the airport while other locations would need development.

The Site Selection Committee having met several times over a period of months in fall of 1999 and Winter of 2000 came to a unanimous decision to recommend to COMAR the Terminal Station based on their deliberations. On March 9, 2000 after hearing the report from the Committee moved unanimously to recommend to the Program Management Team at an upcoming 'Rail Summit' the use of the historic Terminal Station as Middle Georgia's 'Union Station'. C/ve Cunningham, Chair of COMAR Site Selection Committee