

Why the trains don't run on time

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

February 7, 2014

[Frustrating news out of North Dakota](#): one of the most viable longer-range Amtrak routes is being plagued by delays, courtesy of a parade of freight trains hauling crude away from oil-boom country.

This is the point where passenger-rail skeptics and government haters generally laugh and say, what else is new? Amtrak's running late!

But our shell of a national passenger rail system has been dealt a pretty tough hand. Cars have public highways, funded by not just gas taxes but also lots of other public dollars. Airlines get major public subsidies (which [don't always inspire loyalty](#) to the publics in question). Also access to public airspace.

And Amtrak? It gets a federal subsidy that covers a minority of its expenses at the cost of [a small fraction of what the federal government appropriates for highways](#). (This investment gap has existed for decades; it's a cause, not just an effect, of passenger rail's low ridership.) And Amtrak is pretty much at the mercy of the private freight companies that own the tracks it runs on.

This—not government incompetence or whatever—is what makes Amtrak delays so bad. We have invested massively in auto and air transportation, while leaving passenger rail to fend mostly for itself. Then critics add insult to injury by blasting Amtrak for its tiny sliver of the federal-budget pie.

It's a real shame, because cars and planes are taking that North Dakota crude and doing a real number on the environment. Passenger rail is a far more energy-efficient mode of travel.

Sure, we could help free up the tracks between Chicago and Seattle by building pipelines to move the oil [instead](#). Better yet, we could get serious about a sustainable future—which will include less fossil fuel, more renewable energy, less auto and air travel, and more (public or [private](#)) passenger rail.