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From Chicago, I cover green technology, energy, and the environment.

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U.S. Poised For Passenger Rail Boom

Of planes, trains, and automobiles, only one can accommodate America's growing need for urban and intercity transportation, according to a panel of transportation officials who gathered in Chicago Wednesday.

Transportation officials from Chicago, Denver and Washington DC gathered at the headquarters of the Metropolitan Planning Council to discuss the need for "fun and functional transit centers." Underlying fun and function, however, was a common assumption that U.S. transit centers are about to become much more crowded.



"If you look at the current dominant modes of transportation—highways and aviation—they are capacity constrained, capital starved, and there is not much in the way of optimism about either of them," said Tom Downs, the Washington-based chairman of Paris-based Veolia Transportation.

"Your capacity seems to be pretty much unlimited for rail."

Downs led Amtrak from 1993-98 and served as executive director of the Federal Transit Administration, a White House fellow to the U.S. Dept. of Transportation, president of New

York's Tri Boro Bridge and Tunnel Authority, director of the District of Columbia Department of Transportation, among other roles.

The coming boom in passenger rail is so palpable, he said, that traditional rail companies that long ago abandoned passenger service are **demanding a return to the business.**

"If you think about the business participation in passenger railroads, it's coming back. My suspicion is that it's going to come back very strongly."

Downs's comments were backed up by Luann Hamilton, deputy director of the Chicago Department of Transportation—who said Chicago estimates it will see a 40 percent increase in train traffic by 2040—and by Frank Cannon, president of Denver's Union Station Neighborhood Company, which is revitalizing Denver's historic train hub.

From the day Denver's light-rail system opened, Cannon said, it exceeded its 20-year ridership projections.

And railroads can accommodate dramatic increases in traffic more easily than highways or aviation.

"All of these [other modes of transportation] are becoming a little more obsolete, a little more constrained," Downs said. "It is next to impossible to add a lane to a freeway in urban America today."

Young workers are choosing urban homes where they have many transportation options other than cars, the panelists agreed. In Chicago, Sara Lee and Devry plan to locate new offices near Union Station, which the city plans to transform into a more effective hub for the regional and municipal bus and rail systems that serve the city.

"The creative workforce they want to attract wants to be in the city and doesn't want to be on some isolated campus," Hamilton said.

And that scenario is repeated nationwide.

"A significant portion of that population doesn't own a car and doesn't want to own a car," Downs said of young workers. "Mostly they're downtown because they have transportation choices that are rich and varied and dependable, and that are expanding."

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