

## High-speed rail: The whole story hasn't been told

One of the most fascinating aspects of journalism is the goal of objectivity. Journalists are expected, for the most part, to research news stories and report the facts to the general public in an unbiased manner. Unfortunately, this expectation sometimes leaves the readers without a clear understanding of the issues at stake.

Case in point: last Friday's news story concerning Southwest Airlines court challenge of the legitimacy of the Texas High Speed Rail Authority franchise agreement with the French-based TGV. Under the franchise agreement, TGV will construct and operate a high-speed rail system between the major cities of Texas. The first link joining Dallas and Houston is expected to be operating by 1998. For those of you who missed this small but significant item, Southwest is basing an appeal to the franchise on the argument that Authority members were potentially influenced by a trip to Europe on the tab of TGV.

Southwest Airlines contends that the High Speed Rail Authority members should not have been in the position to be influenced by the bidders for the \$6 billion project. Not only is Southwest Airlines seeking a rehearing, but so is Texas FasTrac, the German firm that lost the bid to the French.

This is what the objective journalism gave us. Now here's the scoop: the Authority members also took a trip to Germany to view the FasTrac system, compliments of the German bidder. So, although FasTrac provided the same potentially-influencing trip to the THSRA members as the French did, the German firm is challenging the franchise award because Texas TGV won the lucrative contract. Are you following their line of thinking? It goes like this: If we don't get the franchise, well then nobody's going to build a rail system in this state.

The hypocrisy doesn't stop there, though. Southwest Airlines, which

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originally contended that authority members should not be influenced, should take a closer look at its own practices. Doesn't Southwest Airlines, like all major corporations, have several lobbyist at its beck and call? And don't you think that those lobbyists spend time in the nation's capital, as well as many other state capitals, including Austin, trying to do exactly what it's accusing Texas TGV of doing: influencing people with policymaking powers?

And the hypocrisy goes on... If you can think back a few months, you might remember that Southwest Airlines was making waves across the state by asserting that the high-speed rail system would require taxpayer subsidies, perhaps as high as \$1 billion. Now, that kind of money caught a lot of attention, since this state is in a fiscal crunch. However, this issue should be

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examined in a broader context.

The airline's claim about taxpayer assistance may be true. But is Southwest Airlines, or any airline for that matter, in a position to complain? Is it not the airlines that fill up the airports of this country, which taxpayers have provided? Sure, it is easy for Southwest Airlines to balk at the costs taxpayers might bear for the railroad, but have they ever complained about the tax subsidies the airlines enjoy? Certainly not.

What we have here is a case of two losers complaining to the only sympathetic ear they can find: the court system. Sure, \$1 billion does sound like a lot of taxpayer money for a private transportation system. But wouldn't that money directly return to benefit the taxpayers? Compare this investment to another that our purportedly wise legislators have made: the Superconducting Super Collider.

Heck, what good are we ever going to see come about from the \$1 billion state commitment to the supercollider? Will that money ever be recouped? Will it ever help our children's education? Or our highways? Will that money go to help you visit your relatives in Dallas or Houston? Or will that money help you and that special person in your life be carried away to San Antonio for the weekend? Answer to all: no.

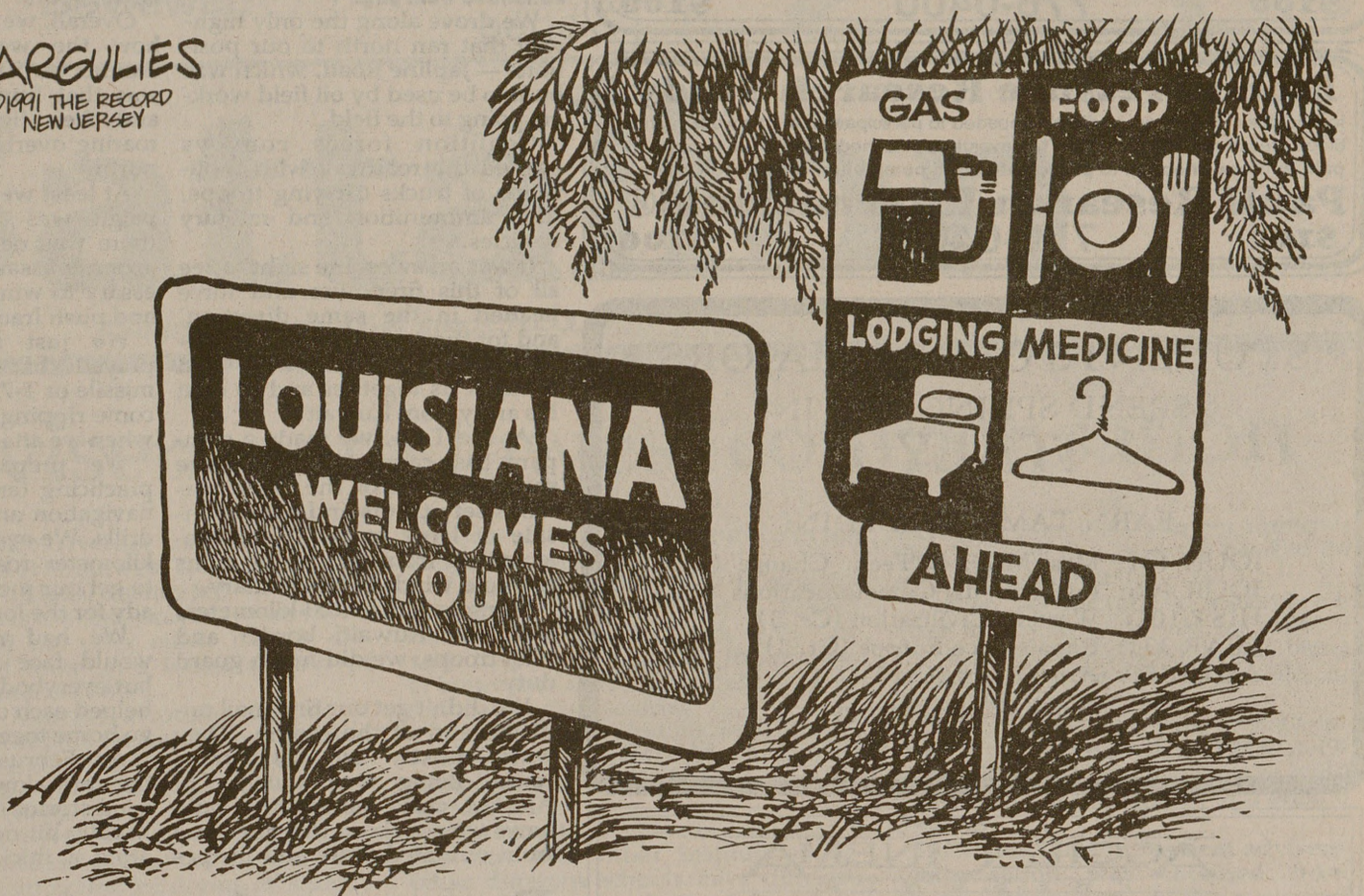
Anyone who has ever visited train-crazed Europe realizes the value, ease and pleasure that fast-moving trains could provide to this state. Not only does the possibility for traveling across state exist, but so does the possibility of an expanded rail system to all portions of the Lone Star State. Just think, if College Station is fortunate enough to get a high-speed rail stop (as the system is currently planned), a person could commute to Houston from here. Talk about redefining urban sprawl! Heck, you could go to the library in Dallas and come back on the same evening. Just think about the Ring Dance possibilities for the future...

But nooo... Ever since the 100-mile-per-hour train moved closer to reality, Southwest Airlines has engaged in a public relations campaign to kill high-speed rail in Texas forever. Can we blame them? Although this columnist has no empirical evidence to this effect, it seems likely that a highly integrated high-speed rail system in Texas could seriously impact the airline's profits. But are the profits for a single, albeit Texas-based, airline so much of a concern as to stop the trains for all 17 million residents of this state? I think not.

The high-speed rail franchise was awarded to Texas TGV over three weeks ago. Hey, Southwest Airlines and Texas FasTrac! Quit your whining and let the citizens of this state have what they want: high-speed rail. And get out of the way of the High-Speed Rail Authority, for the trains are pulling out of the station of imagination and on to the track of future. All-a-board, y'all!

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## MAIL CALL

The Battalion is interested in hearing from its readers and welcomes all letters to the editor. Please include name, classification, address and phone number on all letters. The editor reserves the right to edit letters for style and length. Because of limited space, shorter letters have a better chance of appearing. There is, however, no guarantee letters will appear. Letters may be brought to 216 Reed McDonald or sent to Campus Mail Stop 1111.

### In defense of the automobile

EDITOR:

In Wednesday's issue of The Battalion, Tim Truesdale noted that gas stations' prices do not reflect the total cost of gasoline in this country. He then goes on to tout public transportation and berate "inefficient automobile usage." I would like to present a contrary view to a few points he raised.

Tim claims the national highway system has cost the cities grievously. He speaks of the wealthy abandoning the city in favor of the suburbs. I would like to know what he would have the populace do, crowd into greater and greater rat warrens of the New York and East Coast models? The proportion of rural Americans has steadily fallen since the Depression. All the harbingers of doom tell us small-town America is dying. There are no jobs, no opportunities, no future left in the backwaters; the only hope for the young are the urban centers. It seems Tim would have us all packed shoulder to shoulder in highrise apartment clusters. It might benefit him to look at the psychological studies that have shown animals do not function well in such supremely high densities. Rats cramped in too-crowded a space become violent and depressed. Humans do the same. The flight to the suburbs is not a symptom of the "poison of the highways" but rather an act of self-preservation.

Tim further claims that the use of the automobile has killed contact between diverse peoples. I invite Tim to examine the United States before the advent of the automobile. Today the automobile allows a degree of mobility unthinkable to our forefathers.

My central concern though is with individual freedom. When you have a personal vehicle you are not limited to going where someone else wishes to go when someone else would like to go there. The Supreme Court has recently ruled that the police may search and seize on public transportation without warrant or probable cause. They regularly institute checkpoints claiming to be searching for drunken drivers or some other popular cause, ignoring the Constitution. I fully support public transportation, but not at the expense of private transportation.

R. Michael Litchfeld '91

### Advice on buying tropical birds

EDITOR:

I wish to thank Battalion columnist Michael Worsham for the advice and addresses that people can write to in order to help protect the rainforests. It is true that deforestation is severely endangering most of the tropical birds. However, I disagree that people should not consider buying a bird as a pet. These birds, particularly parrots, are extremely intelligent, affectionate companions. Living with a bird can only convince someone to save these wonderful creatures and their habitat. Here is some responsible information for anyone interested in pet birds or their conservation:

Don't buy smuggled birds. Many birds are captured in their wild habitat and smuggled into the United States illegally, avoiding quarantine regulations. Smuggling brings disease, disrupts the wild population of the species and contributes to the destruction of nesting sites. Recently, over 100 baby birds died when a smuggling deal went "bad" in South Texas. By the time the birds were passed by the authorities, they had been without food for two days. The survivors are here at Texas A&M where they are in a program that plans for their release.

Buy only a domestically raised bird. There are breeders in the local area and throughout the country who raise domestically bred birds. Often you can finish hand feeding a baby if you buy it young enough, but learn how before you try. Don't buy from pet shops because they usually keep the birds in crowded cages and feed inadequate diets.

Before you buy, read! Inform yourself about the care of birds before you buy one. Birdtalk magazine is packed with information on care and conservation. Barrons publishes some excellent books, such as "The New Parrot Handbook," which explains general care and nutrition.

Join your local bird club. The Brazos Valley Caged Bird Club is active locally. Contact Kathy Everett at 822-0763 for information.

Consult an avian veterinarian. Birds need special care.

Chryseis Fox  
graduate student  
John Borin '92

## Let's have a community service program at A&M

I stand corrected. A couple of weeks ago I went into a tirade about the absence of official problem identification at Texas A&M. In a June 5 column, I ranted and raved about the lack of a standard for what a "world-class" university should be trying to achieve.

According to Monday's (June 24) Bryan-College Station Eagle, University President William Mobley appointed a Task Force on Multiple Missions to verbalize a long-range mission statement for the University. After 17 months, the Committee has submitted its report.

The group "identifies six specific missions of the University: undergraduate education, graduate and professional education, scholarship and research, public service and work with the A&M system agencies."

The report recognizes the interrelatedness of these elements. That is, no one area can be enhanced without benefits spilling over into the other areas. Similarly, no one area can suffer without the other areas suffering.

Sometimes, when faculty members

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Columnist



get together to produce this type of document, the resulting recommendations don't match students' concerns. Fortunately, this was not the case this time.

One of the most voiced (and very legitimate) complaints about schools excelling in research is that teaching responsibilities are neglected. This problem is particularly accentuated in undergraduate classes. Who cares if your professor is the foremost expert on the topic, but can't express herself, or is unavailable outside of class?

To solve this problem, the report recommends the University "encourage greater one-on-one contact between faculty and students and give detailed attention to the improvement of learning and teaching procedures that affect quality."

The Task Force also calls for a

"comprehensive revitalization" of campus libraries, improvement of "support services to free quality time for faculty to pursue mission goals" and the establishment of a "learning skills center that assesses student progress in... skills that will promote learning."

These are wonderful ideas that will benefit every student on this campus. But frankly, this report could not have come out at a worse time from a financial perspective. Many of the recommendations require huge budgets. And in case you haven't been watching lately, state funding has not been exactly floating around.

Although these recommendations are outstanding, the practicality of the situation requires many of them to be shelved until the current temporary fiscal crisis comes to an end. In my opinion, this disappointment turns out to be the beauty of the situation.

There are other missions and recommendations that are far less costly, but which need more immediate attention. The Task Force identifies the University's public service mission as "the channel through which A&M can contribute directly to the improvement of society other than through formal

teaching and scholarship." Unfortunately, "this was described as the least understood of the University's missions."

I'm not a historian of universities, but I would guess that many schools were established to produce knowledgeable citizens, not scholar specialists. Why can't we have both? Can we say that, in the development of the whole person, refining reading and writing skills is any more important than refining a sense of civic responsibility?

I realize that many students, and probably a good number of faculty, have never ventured into certain areas of Bryan and College Station. WE HAVE A THIRD WORLD SITUATION HERE.

The interesting thing is that the task force also calls for programs to "increase the sensitivity and understanding of diversity and pluralism among students, staff, faculty and administrators." But diversity and pluralism are not understood by sitting around in ivory towers and listening to speeches.

I have a proposal that will very inexpensively accomplish both the public service mission and the diversity exposure recommendations of the task force.

Create a Community Service League that directs students into concrete community service experiences. The University of Southern California and Rutgers University have well-developed programs that have proved successful.

Right here in Texas, Baylor University is developing a program that expects over 2000 students to participate by the 1992-1993 school year. This is a voluntary program, but is integrated into the student's field of study. Each professor will be required to attend a summer seminar to encourage integration of classroom learning with the service program.

I believe the Task Force on Multiple Missions is correct in seeking a balance between academic and non-academic missions. In order to accomplish non-academic missions, the University should push students to look outside its sacred walls to the "real world."

Tim Truesdale is a graduate student in urban planning.