



## Do the math

Posted by [Yankee](#) on September 5, 2005 - 12:56pm

Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)

Over at Peak Oil NYC, [Peakguy wonders](#) whether it's going to cost him more to take the train to Washington, DC, or to drive. He does the math:

So let's do the math on the incentives to drive vs. take the train, assuming we simply park the car when we arrive and do not use it for anything except intracity transportation:

Amtrak ticket: \$80 each way, \$160 roundtrip (no discount for RT!)  
2004 Honda Civic: 250 miles, 30 mpg, assume \$3 and \$3.50/gallon gas = \$25-30/each way. That's really cheap compared to the \$80 Amtrak tickets.

Not that most people factor this into their plans, but gas is only a fraction of the cost of using a car for this trip. Let's assume parking is \$25 each night x 3 nights. Tolls will be another \$15 each way (bridge/NJ Turnpike/Tunnel). That brings us up to a total roundtrip cost for the car to \$155-165. Ok that's competitive on the margin for one person to take the train, but remember this was a two person trip, meaning the car costs would be cut in half. This is the power of carpooling.

(Still, he ended up taking the train.)

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This is yet another reminder of the state of rail travel in the US. Amtrak is neglected, and practically unsustainable, and even though it does work well on the east coast, it's so expensive that only executives can afford to take it.

Still, there is hope, should we get to the point where the nation becomes desperate for rail travel as an alternative. The US has a history of railroading (and electric streetcars, even though they were [systematically destroyed](#) in the early 1900s in favor of car travel), and the good news is that the US has a lot of old rights-of-way for railroads that still exist and that can be converted back to rail travel fairly straightforwardly. Interestingly, these rights-of-way are currently being protected through a policy called "railbanking". According to the [Rails-to-Trails Conservancy](#):

Railbanking (as defined by the [National Trails System Act](#), 16 USC 1247 (d)) is a voluntary agreement between a railroad company and a trail agency to use an out-of-service rail corridor as a trail until some railroad might need the corridor again for rail service. Because a railbanked corridor is not considered abandoned, it can be sold, leased or donated to a trail manager without reverting to adjacent landowners. The railbanking provisions of the National Trails System Act as adopted by Congress in 1983 have preserved 4,431 miles of rail corridors in 33 states that would otherwise have been

abandoned.

It would be sad to see all of these miles of trails closed down, but if it were done in order to resurrect (or should I say create?) passenger and freight rail lines, I'd be all for it.

In full disclosure, I'm not as virtuous as peakguy. I went to Pittsburgh over the weekend, and we did consider taking Amtrak from NYC. For us, it would have been more than economical (\$100RT per person), and many times more ecological too. For me, the problem was time. It took us 4 1/2 hours door-to-door from our hotel in Pittsburgh to our home in NYC, versus over 9 hours for the train. For a 2 day trip, it was just too much time.

And in case anyone is wondering, Pittsburgh had gas for \$3.19 for regular grade, and no lines anywhere.



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