

# Riding the Community Rails

Commuting from Point A to Point B in Vermont typically involves a car, a bus, a bicycle, a ferry, an airplane, a canoe, a trusty pair of feet, a Segway, a horse, and, perhaps soon – thanks to the vision of AllEarth Rail founder David Blittersdorf – a fleet of rail diesel cars (RDCs).

An RDC is a bidirectional railcar designed for regional passenger service built by the Budd Company of Philadelphia. Between 1949 and 1962, the company built a total of 398 of them for 32 different railroads. RDCs were especially popular in New England. By the late 1950s, for example, the number of RDCs operated by the Boston and Maine Railroad grew to 108.

Each car can seat 94 passengers and is 85 feet long. (Coincidentally, the unit's top speed is 85 m.p.h.) It has a diesel engine and driver's control vestibule at each end, thus eliminating the need to turn the car around at a terminal. A typical passenger train requires a crew of three or more; an RDC can be operated by a single engineer, which is a significant cost-saver. Under normal conditions, an RDC averages 2.8 miles on a gallon of diesel fuel. Because each car is independently self-propelled, a train of several cars can uncouple at a station and individually go on to serve multiple destinations.

The 12 rail cars that comprise AllEarth Rail's fleet had been part of a light rail system in Dallas, Texas. When that city outgrew the cars and switched to larger, double-decker units, it put these units on the market. And Blittersdorf out-bid ViaRail Canada for them.

The cars are in remarkably good shape, having been overhauled and refurbished in Montréal in the late 1990s. Additional servicing of the cars takes place at the former Bombardier plant in Barre. Ten of the rail cars are currently there, as are lots of spare parts – an important part of the Dallas bid package.

Last November, at an open house (open railcar?) in Montpelier, AllEarth Rail representatives showed off one of their cars. Communication and Public Affairs Manager Nick Charyk said there was a great deal of enthusiasm from both the public and from legislators as they envisioned how the car could serve their communities. And “community rail” – that is, rail that connects communities – was more indicative of how the cars could serve Vermont than was

“commuter rail.”

AllEarth Rail is proposing an initial trial route of Saint Albans through Milton to Essex. The advantages, says Charyk, are that “the infrastructure is ready to go, the rail is in really good shape, some facilities are already in place, and there is a significant commuter population.” Saint Albans City Manager Dom Cloud enthusiastically supports the idea. “It’s a no-brainer for us,” he says. “We’re in the business of economic development, and these rail cars would help bring that to our city.” Thereafter, the company hopes to rapidly expand the service throughout the state.

Before that can happen, some issues have to be resolved. Vermont’s railroad tracks are owned by different concerns: Vermont Rail System owns some of the track. Other parts are owned or leased by the State of Vermont or by entities such as Genesee and Wyoming, an American short line railroad holding company. The operator of an RDC would need to secure trackage rights. “We’re very early in that phase,” says Charyk, “but as communities and the State get behind this project, it’s a negotiation that I think will go smoothly.”

Another question is who would operate the RDCs? AllEarth Rail’s role is to provide and maintain the rail cars, not to operate them. The Agency of Transportation supports the idea of commuter rail service in the state but doesn’t have funds to subsidize it. However, Charyk says there are other good options. “Vermont Rail System could do it. They operated the Champlain Flyer [a commuter train that serviced Burlington, Shelburne, and Charlotte from 2000-2003], and they (currently) do some excursion rail.” Amtrak is another possibility.

This winter, AllEarth Rail plans to educate transportation committees members and do outreach to municipalities on the benefits of RDCs in Vermont. Eighty-five percent of Vermonters live within one mile of a railroad track, so the project could affect a large swath of the population.

Interested in having a rail diesel car stop in your town? Contact AllEarth Rail ( [www.alleearthrail.com/](http://www.alleearthrail.com/)), spread the word around town, and maybe you’ll soon be able to ride Vermont’s community rails!

David Gunn  
Editor, VLCT News