

Tackling Montana's Housing Crisis Through Regional Rail Expansion: A Comprehensive Study

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Executive Summary

The "Connecting Communities" initiative by Integrated Travel & Rail Development (ITRD) offers a transformative opportunity to address Montana's persistent housing crisis, particularly in areas surrounding Glacier National Park and Yellowstone National Park. The initiative seeks to assess the socio-economic impacts of expanding regional rail networks, focusing on community revitalization, housing affordability, and sustainable growth.

This report explores the potential of regional rail expansion as a solution to housing affordability challenges in underserved areas, particularly where the cost of living is high, and housing supply is insufficient. The project examines economic stimulation, job creation, and long-term community revitalization as core benefits. Policy recommendations are provided to ensure the initiative aligns with the "Rail for All" strategy, emphasizing safety, accessibility, and equity.

Key deliverables of the report include a detailed assessment of the socio-economic impacts of rail expansion, a strategic plan for addressing the housing crisis through rail connectivity, and policy suggestions to promote sustainable, equitable development.

Introduction

Background and Context

Montana's housing crisis is a pressing issue, particularly in areas surrounding Glacier National Park and Yellowstone National Park, where high seasonal demand and geographical constraints have resulted in a shortage of affordable housing. In these areas, many workers face long commutes, high rents, and limited housing availability. The region's economic development has been further hindered by poor connectivity, leaving many communities isolated from employment centers, healthcare, and educational opportunities.

The "Connecting Communities" initiative by ITRD aims to address these challenges through the expansion of regional rail services. By enhancing connectivity between Montana's underserved communities, particularly those near national parks, the initiative seeks to foster balanced regional development, stimulate local economies, and improve housing affordability.

The "Rail for All" Strategy

The initiative aligns with ITRD's broader "Rail for All" strategy, which emphasizes five key pillars: safety, sustainability, practicality, accessibility, and equality. This strategy is designed to ensure that rail infrastructure not only promotes economic growth but also supports environmental sustainability and equitable access for all communities, including underserved and indigenous populations.

Montana's Housing Crisis: Causes and Challenges

Geographic and Demographic Factors

Montana's vast and rugged geography plays a significant role in its housing crisis. With large swathes of land dedicated to agriculture, wilderness, and national parks, there are limited areas available for housing development, particularly in proximity to employment centers. The state's population density is low, and much of the workforce around Glacier and Yellowstone National

Parks is seasonal, which puts additional pressure on the housing market during peak tourism seasons.

Socioeconomic Challenges

The housing crisis is exacerbated by a growing gap between wages and housing costs. Many workers in the tourism and service industries near the national parks earn modest wages, which makes it difficult to afford housing in these areas. Additionally, rising property values in popular tourist destinations have made it challenging for local residents to find affordable homes.

Housing Affordability and Supply

Housing affordability remains a critical issue in Montana, especially in communities near national parks. According to recent data, the median home price in these areas far exceeds the average income, leading to a shortage of affordable housing options. Rental prices are also disproportionately high, forcing many workers to live far from their jobs and commute long distances.

Rail Network Expansion and Community Revitalization

Benefits of Improved Connectivity

Expanding the regional rail network has the potential to significantly improve community connectivity across Montana. By providing fast, reliable transportation options, rail services can reduce the need for long car commutes, lowering transportation costs for workers and residents alike. This improved connectivity would allow more people to live in affordable areas farther from the parks while still maintaining access to job opportunities and essential services.

Impact on Community Life

Beyond transportation, rail expansion can play a pivotal role in revitalizing communities. By linking isolated towns and rural areas to larger cities, rail services can stimulate local economies by bringing in tourists and providing residents with better access to goods, services, and job markets. Additionally, rail stations can serve as hubs for community development, attracting businesses and encouraging the construction of new housing, retail, and public facilities around transit-oriented developments (TOD).

Case Studies

Other regions have successfully leveraged rail expansion to spur community revitalization. For example, California's High-Speed Rail project has demonstrated the potential for rail infrastructure to boost local economies, create jobs, and encourage sustainable growth. Similarly, Canada's VIA Rail has contributed to regional economic development by connecting rural communities to urban centers. These examples provide valuable insights into how Montana's rail expansion can positively impact housing and community development.

Housing Affordability and Rail Connectivity

Relationship Between Transportation and Housing Markets

Transportation infrastructure plays a critical role in shaping housing markets. Research shows that areas with better public transportation tend to experience increased housing demand, particularly near transit hubs. Rail services reduce transportation costs, making it more affordable for residents to live in areas farther from employment centers. Additionally, transit-oriented developments (TOD) often spur new housing construction, which can help alleviate housing shortages.

Potential for Housing Development Along the Corridor

The proposed rail expansion corridor in Montana presents several opportunities for housing development. Communities along the rail line can benefit from increased demand for housing, which would incentivize developers to build new affordable homes. Additionally, local governments can implement zoning reforms and offer incentives to encourage the construction of affordable housing near rail stations, ensuring that rail connectivity translates into tangible benefits for local residents.

Policy Incentives for Housing Development

To ensure that rail expansion leads to meaningful improvements in housing affordability, policymakers must implement supportive zoning and development policies. These could include density bonuses, which allow developers to build more housing units in exchange for providing affordable housing, as well as tax incentives for affordable housing projects near transit hubs. Local governments can also prioritize affordable housing development in transit-oriented areas, ensuring that rail expansion benefits lower-income residents.

Economic Impacts of Regional Rail Expansion

Economic Stimulation Through Job Creation

Rail expansion is not only a transportation solution but also a powerful tool for economic stimulation. The construction and operation of new rail lines will create thousands of jobs in Montana, ranging from construction workers to engineers and transportation staff. Additionally, rail stations and transit-oriented developments can attract new businesses, providing further employment opportunities for local residents.

Return on Investment (ROI)

Investing in rail infrastructure has the potential to generate a strong return on investment (ROI) for Montana. Rail services can increase property values near stations, stimulate economic growth, and boost local tax revenues. Furthermore, the environmental benefits of rail (e.g., reduced car dependency and lower carbon emissions) align with long-term sustainability goals, potentially attracting federal funding and grants.

Long-Term Economic Growth

Over the long term, the expanded rail network will contribute to sustained economic growth by improving access to housing and jobs, reducing transportation costs, and supporting the tourism industry. Rail services will make it easier for visitors to reach Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks, boosting the local economy while simultaneously alleviating some of the transportation challenges associated with car-based tourism.

Equity and Inclusion: Engaging Underserved and Indigenous Communities

Challenges Facing Underserved Communities

Montana's underserved and indigenous communities face unique challenges related to housing and transportation. Many of these communities are located in remote areas with limited access to public services and employment opportunities. High transportation costs and poor connectivity further exacerbate these challenges, making it difficult for residents to access affordable housing and jobs.

Engagement Strategies

To ensure that the benefits of rail expansion are shared equitably, it is essential to engage underserved and indigenous communities in the planning process. This includes conducting outreach to gather input from these communities, ensuring that their needs and priorities are addressed in the project. Additionally, providing affordable rail services that cater to the specific needs of these populations will be critical to promoting inclusive growth.

Policy Recommendations

Policymakers should prioritize equity in the rail expansion process by implementing policies that promote affordable housing development in underserved areas. Additionally, efforts should be made to ensure that rail services are accessible to all residents, including those with limited financial resources. Offering discounted fares for low-income residents and providing transit services to underserved communities can help ensure that rail expansion does not exacerbate existing inequalities.

Sustainability and the "Rail for All" Strategy

Environmental Sustainability

Rail services are a key component of environmentally sustainable transportation systems. By reducing car dependency, rail can lower greenhouse gas emissions, decrease traffic congestion, and reduce the environmental impact of tourism in Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks. Rail infrastructure also aligns with broader efforts to promote green development, such as energy-efficient buildings and renewable energy projects.

Safety, Accessibility, and Equality

The "Rail for All" strategy emphasizes the importance of safety, accessibility, and equality in transportation planning. Rail services must be designed to meet the needs of all residents, including those with disabilities, low-income individuals, and underserved populations. By ensuring that rail stations are safe, accessible, and inclusive, the initiative can promote greater social equity while enhancing community resilience.

Practicality and Feasibility

The practicality of the proposed rail expansion depends on careful planning and coordination with local governments, transportation agencies, and community stakeholders. While the project will

require significant investment, the long-term benefits of improved transportation connectivity, economic stimulation, and community revitalization make it a feasible and worthwhile endeavor.

Policy Framework and Recommendations

Policy Framework for Equitable Rail Expansion

To support equitable rail expansion, policymakers should develop a comprehensive policy framework that addresses housing affordability, community revitalization, and economic development. This framework should prioritize investment in underserved communities, ensure that rail services are accessible to all residents, and promote sustainable, transit-oriented development.

Supportive Zoning and Development Policies

Local governments can implement zoning reforms and development incentives to encourage the construction of affordable housing near rail stations. These policies should prioritize mixed-use developments that include affordable housing, retail, and public services, ensuring that rail expansion benefits both local residents and businesses.

Integration with Broader Infrastructure Goals

Rail expansion should be integrated with broader infrastructure goals, such as road improvements, broadband access, and renewable energy projects. By aligning rail expansion with other infrastructure initiatives, Montana can create comprehensive, sustainable solutions that promote economic growth, community resilience, and environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

The "Connecting Communities" initiative by ITRD presents a unique opportunity to tackle Montana's housing crisis while promoting sustainable, equitable growth. By expanding the regional rail network, Montana can improve housing affordability, stimulate local economies, and revitalize underserved communities. However, careful planning and targeted policy interventions are necessary to ensure that rail expansion benefits all residents, particularly those in underserved and indigenous communities. With the right strategies in place, rail expansion can be a powerful tool for creating a more connected, inclusive, and sustainable future for Montana.

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