



Forget Paris. I'll bus to Harrisburg

By [Brian O'Neill](#), Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
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On the same day the Post-Gazette had a front-page story that trumpeted as much as \$9 million in subsidies to back a new Delta flight from Pittsburgh to Paris, we ran a story on the Local front about a new luxury bus to Harrisburg.

I like a good crepe as much as the next guy, but I'm more excited about the bus.

The Steel City Flyer is the brainchild of a couple of railroad guys in Green Tree and the owner of a fleet of buses in the Mon Valley, and no subsidy is asked.

The bus will link in Harrisburg to high-speed Amtrak trains that go to Philadelphia and New York. The Flyer team hopes to eventually allow a bus rider transferring to the train to buy one ticket to cover both fares.

George DeBolt, the third-generation chief of the DeBolt transportation companies in Homestead, is partnering with Henry Posner III and Bob Pietrandrea, chairman and president of Railroad Development Corp., a Green Tree-based company with international rail investments.

Mr. DeBolt said he and the rail men may move people in different ways but both "think intermodally."

"We think the best way is combinations, and nobody else thinks that way. Talk to a rail guy and all they want to do is talk about rail. Talk to a bus guy and all they want to do is talk about buses.

"Let's take what we've got and think about what's the best way to tweak it a little bit and move people."

Mr. DeBolt was one of the first people I met when I moved to Pittsburgh 20 years ago, and he remains the only one I know who loves driving on the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

Driving that pike takes him back to his childhood, when he rode with his father, "Perry" DeBolt, a man

so road-savvy he could tell a Peterbilt diesel engine from a Kenworth by its sound. (Perry's full name was John Pierpont Morgan DeBolt, his parents applying the most prestigious tag they could imagine, but that moniker had nary a prayer of sticking in the Mon Valley.)

Yesterday, a 45-foot, German-built Daimler bus with padded adjustable seats, a carpeted aisle and a lavatory -- it's not your father's 16D -- pulled up in front of the Post-Gazette Building. Mr. DeBolt and I rode it to the Railroad Development Corp. office just off the Parkway West and Mr. Pietrandrea climbed aboard. He talked about offering coffee, earphones, pillows, wireless Internet service and legroom, plenty of legroom, all for a flat \$69 fare each way.

"We're not going to nickel and dime people," he said.

The unsung key to this deal was PennDOT and Amtrak completing a \$145 million upgrade of the railroad between Harrisburg and Philadelphia a couple of years ago. The resulting train service is cheap (\$23, Harrisburg to Philly), frequent (14 daily trips each way), speedy (trains can travel up to 110 mph on the dedicated electrified line) and popular. Nearly 1 million passengers rode Amtrak's Keystone Corridor this past fiscal year.

"Without the high-speed rail link to the east, it would have made no sense whatsoever," Mr. Posner said of this new service. "There'd be nothing to connect with, therefore I would not have had the idea since I'm a railroad guy."

Mr. DeBolt has been thinking about a luxury bus to Harrisburg for a decade, and when US Airways dropped its only direct flight from here to Harrisburg last summer, he was even more eager to partner with the railroad men.

A roughly 3.5-hour, downtown-to-downtown bus ride should be faster door-to-door and more comfortable than flying, given the parking and security hassles of 21st-century flight. Mr. Posner found it ironic that their announcement hit the paper the same day as the new flight to Paris.

That flight, to begin in June, required the state and the Allegheny Conference on Community Development to provide up to \$2.5 million each after the first year of flights and up to \$2 million each after the second year if Delta's revenues don't reach an agreed-upon level.

"When was the last time any corporate welfare program came close to making its projections?" Mr. Posner asked.

By coincidence, he was calling from Paris, where he's attending a business conference. He flew to London and then took a high-speed train under the English Channel to France, natch.

The Steel City Flyer will soar or fade on its own merits. But it represents a desperately needed jolt of entrepreneurial spirit when so much of the rest of corporate America is either pulling back or looking for handouts or both.

There will be stops on the North Shore, Downtown and in Monroeville. Each weekday, two daily buses will go to Harrisburg (leaving Downtown at 7 a.m. and 2:15 p.m.) and two will return (leaving the capital city at 9:20 a.m. and 3:50 p.m.) The first one leaves Monday, Nov. 24, and the Flyer will also run the full schedule on Nov. 30, the Sunday after Thanksgiving. For more information, call 412-461-9132 or visit the website www.steelcityflyer.com.