

# **AMTRAK'S LONG-DISTANCE TRAINS: BRIEF HISTORY, BENEFITS, INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES**



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Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission  
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## **Brief History of Amtrak's Long-Distance Service**

The Rail Passenger Service Act of 1970, which created Amtrak, aimed to relieve private railroads of their passenger losses and create a nationwide intercity passenger train network under a single management. This would largely replace a private-sector operation under which many different railroads controlled their own services, maintaining varying degrees of service quality.

In a sense, this was a repeat of what happened during World War I. On December 26, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson by executive order established the United States Railway Administration (USRA), whose director general ordered railroads to eliminate unessential passenger service, to eliminate competitive passenger service, and to jointly use passenger terminals and city ticket offices where feasible.

The railroads were returned to private control in March, 1920. In the words of railroad historian Gregory Lee Thompson, "Rather than improving on passenger efficiencies introduced by the USRA, or even maintaining such efficiencies, [railroads] intended to increase passenger costs even further and make the passengers pay for the increased costs. Although passengers never asked for such expensive items as ostentatious city terminals and duplicate luxury services, the ICC gave its blessing to fare increases with the hope that passengers would finance such unproductive debt and expenses." Fare increases and the simultaneous growing affordability of the automobile set the stage for massive train ridership declines.

The debate which preceded Amtrak's May 1, 1971, start of operations focused heavily on what the Long-Distance (LD) network should look like. The U.S. Department of Transportation designated the original network. A preliminary plan omitted some key routes. Among them was the Los Angeles-Seattle *Coast Starlight*. This was restored in the final plan that was implemented and has always been regarded as one of the system's most important routes – as well as the only north-south route west of Chicago.

Overall, the advent of Amtrak coincided with the elimination of about half of the nation's intercity passenger trains. While some viewed the 1970 law as a method of eliminating passenger trains in an orderly manner, three key events combined to save the U.S. intercity passenger train:

- Watergate reduced the Nixon Administration's influence over this and other policy issues;
- The Arab oil embargo and the OPEC price increases of 1973-74 drove passenger rail ridership up; and
- Long gas lines that followed the 1979 Iranian Revolution also increased ridership and resulted in political cartoons ridiculing the Carter Administration for advancing major Amtrak route cuts while the apparent need for those trains was so strong.

A key year for Amtrak was 1982 when the antiquated "heritage" climate control systems finally were eliminated and all Amtrak trains were equipped with electric heating and air-conditioning, both the cars that were purchased new and older cars that Amtrak converted from steam heat and various antiquated air-conditioning systems. The timing was significant because it meant that, by the time the Reagan Administration turned its guns on Amtrak, Amtrak was able to offer the best service quality of its short history.

The route structure underwent three major changes. In 1979, several key routes were eliminated, although strong public support for the trains meant that the route structure shrank by a net 14% (one major route was added) rather than the 43% that U.S. DOT proposed. In 1981, there were relatively minor adjustments and improvements.

- The St. Louis-San Antonio train was reduced from daily to tri-weekly, and its segment between San Antonio and the Mexican border at Laredo was dropped. However, two improvements were introduced: the train's San Antonio stop was moved from an isolated platform to the Southern Pacific station already served by the *Sunset Limited*, and through sleepers and coaches were introduced between Chicago-Dallas-San Antonio and San Antonio-Tucson-Los Angeles (running on the *Sunset* between San Antonio and Los Angeles).
- The lightly used Washington-Cumberland MD-Parkersburg WV-Cincinnati train was replaced with Washington-Cumberland-Pittsburgh-Chicago service.
- The Chicago-Seattle *Empire Builder* gained a Portland, OR, section.

April 1, 1995 saw the last run of the overnight Washington-Montreal *Montrealer* which was replaced next day with the daytime Vermont-supported Washington-St. Albans *Vermont*. May, 1997, saw the end of the *Pioneer* (Eastern Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming) and the *Desert Wind* (Los Angeles-Las Vegas-Salt Lake City); both trains had Chicago through-cars.

In recent years, long-distance ridership has been strong. Amtrak's October 14, 2013, release stated, "During FY 2013...all long distance routes combined had the best ridership in 20 years with 4.8 million passengers." That year, the LD routes accounted for 43% of Amtrak passenger-miles. (A passenger-mile is one passenger carried one mile.)

Six out of seven passengers on the LD trains travel coach; these people have the lowest average incomes of all Amtrak passengers. The average coach passenger's trip is 544 miles; the average sleeping-car passenger rides 1,001 miles. These are "unlinked trips," meaning these numbers refer only to trip length on one route and thus understate the actual trip length for anyone making one or more transfers.

### **Benefits of Long-Distance Trains**

Even in communities with just one train a day in each direction, Amtrak service has proved a catalyst for development of modern, intermodal stations which anchor local transit services as well as intercity buses, making those services easier and pleasanter to use, especially for those who have to change vehicles. The poster child is Meridian, MS. The following is from the May 15, 2014, testimony before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, & Transportation Subcommittee on Surface Transportation and Merchant Marine Infrastructure, Safety, and Security. It was given by John Robert Smith, Chairman, Transportation for America, and long-time former Republican mayor of Meridian.

*I led the effort to turn our historic Meridian Union Station into the South's first multimodal transportation center, which proved to be a catalyst for transforming our downtown, increasing public transportation ridership, and helping to generate millions of dollars in private economic development in the surrounding neighborhoods. Historic buildings were renovated; people came back downtown to both live and work, and also*

*for entertainment. Our city center was revived, not only for residents but for those that lived in the surrounding 11-county region. The city's investment of \$1 million leveraged an additional \$5 million in federal, state, and private sector dollars, which resulted in \$135 million in economic development.*

LD trains have served as placeholders for later development of commuter rail and short-distance intercity corridors. In general, the continued existence of LD trains—and thus track appropriate for passenger operations—makes it easier to start other passenger services on the same tracks, even where track capacity needs force the addition of new track.

LD trains are vital to smaller communities with limited transportation choices. In many cases Amtrak is the only surface public transportation, or provides the only service in a particular direction. Reductions in air and bus services to smaller communities have intensified these factors.

LD trains are vital to individuals who cannot fly—often for medical reasons, temporary or permanent.

### **History of Infrastructure Challenges to Amtrak**

The current *Southwest Chief* challenge (see bottom of page 5) is merely the biggest in a long line of infrastructure issues Amtrak has faced. The magnitude of the challenge is reflected in

- the length of the segment involved: Newton, KS to Albuquerque, NM is 703 miles;
- the importance of the line to the small, otherwise largely isolated communities along this segment (Hutchinson, Dodge City and Garden City, KS; Lamar, La Junta and Trinidad, CO; Raton, Las Vegas and Lamy, NM)
- the fact that BNSF does not want Amtrak on the main freight route.

Of nationwide significance is the sharp distinction between any attempt to apply the principles of Section 209 to LD trains—that is, to require states to pay for operating losses—and what is contemplated here, which is substantial non-host-railroad funding for infrastructure.

Historically, one major reroute occurred at Amtrak's instigation: the *Coast Starlight* was rerouted to Sacramento on April 25, 1982. This lengthened the run by 17 miles which doubtless was considered a small price to pay for entrance into such a significant market.

Below are some of Amtrak's previous infrastructure challenges, none of which—to this writer's knowledge—inspired calls for states to fund LD train operations. In quick summary, #7 ultimately involved a BNSF/State/Amtrak joint funding package, while the others simply resulted in service changes; some communities lost—and a few gained—service. The exit from Phoenix was the highest-profile problem (#5).

1. *Silver Star*: On October 26, 1986, in response to CSX's desire to abandon Centralia, VA, to Norlina, NC (part of the direct line between Petersburg, VA and Raleigh), the *Star* was diverted via Selma, NC, using a Norfolk Southern line between Raleigh and Selma, adding 34 miles to the Petersburg-Raleigh segment (169 miles vs. 135). The reroute came less than four months after CSX was created on July 1, 1986. However, plans to restore

the direct line as part of the Southeast High Speed Rail project are well-advanced. The Tier II EIS is expected to have a Record of Decision by the end of this year, although a timeline for construction is very much dependent on prospects for significant federal funding. A 2012 fact sheet from the Raleigh-based Regional Transportation Alliance said, “The Richmond to Raleigh linkage will be a restored passenger rail corridor that is more than 30 miles shorter than the existing Amtrak line. The combination of high average speeds, shorter length, and fewer stops means that travel times will be reduced by more than 90 minutes via the shortcut.”

2. *Montrealer*: Deteriorating track caused suspension of Amtrak’s Washington-Vermont-Montreal train for about two years starting in April, 1987. In an action ultimately upheld by the Supreme Court, Amtrak seized the line by eminent domain and resold the Brattleboro-Windsor segment to Central Vermont Railway. Led by Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and Rep. Silvio Conte (R-MA, then ranking member of the House Appropriations Committee), Congress appropriated \$5 million to rebuild the track. Because the Massachusetts segment was not transferred, the *Montrealer* when reinstated in July 1989 followed the longer Central Vermont route all the way to New London, CT. The new route was 48 miles longer and bypassed Northampton and Springfield, MA and Hartford and Meriden, CT, while adding service at Amherst, MA, and New London, CT. (On April 1, 1995, the *Montrealer* was replaced with the Vermont-supported *Vermonteer* which ran Washington-St. Albans via Hartford-Springfield-Amherst. This required reversing the train at Palmer, MA, the connection point between the Boston-Albany mainline and the Central Vermont.)
3. *Silver Meteor* (Ocala-Miami section): On June 11, 1988, due to CSX’s desire to abandon the direct Coleman-Auburndale segment, the *Meteor* was rerouted on a parallel, though less direct, line to the West. “The move added 11 miles and 20 minutes to the run, although CSX cut 20 minutes elsewhere between Richmond and Miami in order to offset the added time” (*June, 1988, newsletter of National Association of Railroad Passengers*). Amtrak restructured its Florida services and, in 2004, completely abandoned service to Ocala, mooting the significance of the 1988 abandonment.
4. *City of New Orleans*: In September, 1995, the train was rerouted between Memphis and Jackson because Illinois Central planned to downgrade the route Amtrak used. Batesville, Winona, Grenada, Durant and Canton lost service; Greenwood and Yazoo City gained service, for a net reduction of three stops. Run time changed only a little; in fact, the new northbound schedule was 20 minutes slower than the previous schedule even with the reduction in number of stops. The new route segment was 221 miles, or nine miles longer than the original route.
5. *Sunset Limited*: On June 3, 1996, Amtrak was forced to abandon service to Phoenix due to Southern Pacific plans to abandon the line west of Litchfield, AZ. Amtrak moved to the main freight line to the south and, several years later, added a stop at Maricopa—a 35-mile drive south from the Phoenix station, obviously difficult for people without cars as well as people living north of Phoenix. No highway transfer service is currently offered between Maricopa and Phoenix.
6. *Southwest Chief*: On August 1, 1996, the train was rerouted between Galesburg, IL, and Chicago on the former Burlington Northern mainline through Princeton and Mendota,

sharing the route with Amtrak's *California Zephyr* and the Illinois-supported Chicago-Quincy *Illinois Zephyr*. This was caused by BNSF's intent to abandon part of the former Santa Fe line in Chicago. It had the advantage of consolidating all Amtrak service at one station in Galesburg and increasing service at some other Illinois stations, but eliminated service to Streator and Chillicothe.

7. *Empire Builder*: On June 15, 2011, it was announced that BNSF and Amtrak reached a cost-sharing agreement regarding the rebuilding of the line through Devils Lake, ND, where the existing railroad was threatened by the rising waters of Devils Lake. The total cost was estimated at \$97 million, with one-third each contributed by BNSF, Amtrak and a successful federal TIGER grant application by the State of North Dakota. BNSF advanced Amtrak's share in the form of a loan. These events took place amid a backdrop of dramatic growth in freight business in North Dakota, particularly oil from the Bakken formation, which caused BNSF to revise its earlier, negative view about the freight importance of the Devils Lake line. There was an antecedent to these events: in the 1980s, Burlington Northern sought to downgrade the Devils Lake line and reroute Amtrak's *Empire Builder* between Fargo and Minot via the more direct, freight-only "Surrey Cutoff" through New Rockford. The railroad backed out, evidently in response to strong political pressure—the communities of Rugby, Devils Lake and Grand Forks would have lost service. In early 2011, the Surrey Cutoff again seemed a possibility; fortunately, it was avoided.

### **Funding the Long-Distance Trains is a Federal Responsibility**

It has long been recognized that funding the long-distance (LD) trains is a federal responsibility. This was reaffirmed in the 2008 reauthorization law (the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act – PRIIA) in Section 228, "SENSE OF THE CONGRESS REGARDING THE NEED TO MAINTAIN AMTRAK AS A NATIONAL PASSENGER RAIL SYSTEM," (*see full text in Appendix A, page 9*). In response to suggestions from some that states be required to fund the LD trains, the National Association of Railroad Passengers stated, "It is unrealistic to expect trains that cross so many state lines to gain the support of all the involved states, or to expect all states on a route to agree on schedules, service amenities, and cost allocations among the states."

The following factors have elevated concerns about efforts to make the states pay for LD trains even though it seems doubtful that states could actually do this.

1. All of the state-supported trains survived their initial, October 16, 2013, potential 'death threat' under PRIIA Section 209 even though several states had to pay substantially increased costs and a few had to pay for the first time.
2. Entities that have never before committed funds for intercity passenger rail have done so to support the application, led by Garden City, KS, for a \$24 million federal TIGER grant to improve BNSF tracks used by Amtrak's *Southwest Chief*, tracks which BNSF would not otherwise maintain to passenger-train speeds after January, 2016. As of this writing, 11 Colorado local entities have committed \$254,000 and four Kansas communities \$60,000. In addition, Kansas DOT has committed \$3 million, Amtrak \$4 million and BNSF \$2 million. Finally, BNSF "commits to maintain the restored segment to a Class IV condition outside of their contractual obligations with Amtrak," that is, to a higher

standard than would be required for freight operations. (Quotation is from the grant application.)

3. A Brookings Institution March 1, 2013, report, "A New Alignment: Strengthening America's Commitment to Passenger Rail" (see [www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2013/03/01-passenger-rail-puentes-tomer](http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2013/03/01-passenger-rail-puentes-tomer)) contained many statistics and statements supportive of passenger rail but also recommended applying to the long-distance trains the same mandate of state support that PRIIA applied to the short-distance trains. The positive statements were based on the fact that overall Amtrak ridership growth in recent years outstripped the nation's population growth, and usage trends on airlines, transit and highways. However, this was overwhelmingly attributed to the state-supported trains, a fact that Brookings turned into an argument for requiring state support for the LD trains. Brookings included this argument in House testimony in late 2013.

### **Brief Responses to the Above Points**

1. While it is encouraging that Amtrak and the states reached agreements under which all short-distance trains continued operating in Fiscal 2014, difficult issues remain and there is no guarantee every route will survive a second year. There are concerns about the adequacy of Amtrak's documentation of costs, and the prospect of further cost increases. The states have three working groups addressing "open" issues, focusing on Operating Costs, Equipment Capital Plan, and Performance Standards.
2. The *Southwest Chief* situation, involving reduction or elimination of BNSF freight needs for the line from Newton, KS, to Albuquerque, NM, is another—albeit the biggest—in a long line of infrastructure issues confronting Amtrak and arising from changes in freight traffic patterns (see previous section on the history of infrastructure challenges). This situation, including state and local responses, need not be viewed as a justification for throwing non-infrastructure costs of LD trains onto the backs of the states.
3. The Brookings recommendation is simply unworkable. NARP's March 1, 2013, release, said in part, "In passing the 2008 authorization law, Congress recognized the long-distance trains as a logical, federal responsibility. These trains could not survive a mandate that they get state support. It is unrealistic to expect trains that cross so many state lines to gain the support of all the involved states, or to expect all states on a route to agree on schedules, service amenities, and cost allocations among the states." Those who worked on a three-state Section 209 agreement said they could not imagine working a similar deal involving many more states.

### **What States Can Do**

- **Build on the history of supportive statements** from AASHTO and other multi-state organizations. Emphasize to political leaders the importance of the LD trains.
- Where states are supporting short-distance intercity trains, **it's important for officials to know that LD trains help limit net costs of the short-distance corridors** (and commuter rail) both on the cost side by sharing infrastructure and on the revenue side by feeding connecting passengers. This varies from one corridor to the next. For example, roughly one-quarter of passengers on the *Heartland Flyer* are connecting to or from the

*Texas Eagle.* A considerable number of passengers on the St. Louis-Kansas City route are connecting to/from the *Southwest Chief* at Kansas City; likewise a large contingent of those on the New York-Pittsburgh train (supported by Pennsylvania) connect with the *Capitol Limited* at Pittsburgh.

- **Congress tends to pay attention to mayors and other local officials.** Many of these people already are involved in advocating the retention and improvement of passenger train service to their communities. The intensity of this support often is inversely proportional to the size of the community. This is logical, since being part of the Amtrak network elevates the visibility of a community, and the smallest communities generally have the fewest other “visibility assets” going for them.
- By the same token, **community business leaders are invaluable**, particularly given the high degree of respect that political leaders give to “small business.” The strong support of businesses of any size is helpful in combating the stereotypical notion that “since Amtrak depends on government support, no self-respecting entrepreneur values it.”
- Where appropriate, such as in response to criticism of the size of the LD operating grant, **narratives can note that the NEC operating profit** depends on continued significant federal capital grants to the NEC (*see Appendix B on page 10 for more information*).

## Conclusion

"National network" has been suggested as a better term for the trains discussed in this report. Objections have been raised to "long-distance," based on concern that this feeds the myth that most of the riders are going coast-to-coast or at least the full length of a given train's run, for example, Chicago-Los Angeles or New York-Miami. This myth ignores the huge share of passengers who board and/or alight at intermediate stations.

Whatever the moniker, these trains are in many ways the most visible -- and most debated -- elements of Amtrak. At many points in Amtrak's history, newcomers to Washington or to the subject could be forgiven for thinking that many or all of these trains were on the verge of disappearing.

However, these trains have survived serious threats. For example, during key Reagan Administration years--when Budget Director David Stockman tried to make Amtrak a symbol of what was wrong with federal spending--Mark Andrews, the Republican chairman of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee with Amtrak jurisdiction, was a staunch Amtrak defender. This largely reflected the importance of the *Empire Builder* to his state.

Serious, route-specific threats have led to strong advocacy movements involving citizens, local businesses and political leaders along the route. This was exemplified by formation of the Texas Eagle Marketing and Performance Organization (TEMPO) (see <http://tempo-rail.org/>), created after Amtrak proposed to discontinue that route in the mid-1990s. It is also reflected in the political opposition to rerouting the *Empire Builder* in North Dakota in the 1980s and in the 'permanent' solution to the rising water level of Devils Lake in the past few years, as well as the efforts to preserve the *Southwest Chief* described on page 5.



The resources that localities have poured into their stations -- even those served by one train a day (or three per week) in each direction -- reflect the value they place on having the service, and help explain the staying power of these trains.

Communities take pride in displaying "An Amtrak Served Community" signs with the Amtrak logo on highways entering their town.

To the extent that capacity permits, the LD trains have participated in the ratcheting up of interest in alternatives to driving, which is well documented especially among younger generations. The greater growth in ridership on state-supported corridors largely reflects growth in capacity on those routes, which has no LD parallel. Indeed, most of the 130 new, single-level cars Amtrak is receiving from CAF-USA will replace elderly Heritage cars rather than provide new capacity.

Going forward, the biggest threat to the LD trains may be the lack of capacity, and the danger that existing rolling stock will wear out before it is replaced.

States can play an important role in pressing to prevent this from happening, and in enabling the LD network to continue to keep hundreds of communities across America connected even as air and bus services abandon those communities.

## **APPENDIX A:**

### **Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008, SEC. 228. SENSE OF THE CONGRESS REGARDING THE NEED TO MAINTAIN AMTRAK AS A NATIONAL PASSENGER RAIL SYSTEM.**

#### **(a) FINDINGS.—**

The Congress makes the following findings:

- (1) In fiscal year 2007, 3,800,000 passengers traveled on Amtrak's long-distance trains, an increase of 2.4 percent over fiscal year 2006.
- (2) Amtrak long-distance routes generated \$376,000,000 in revenue in fiscal year 2007, an increase of 5 percent over fiscal year 2006.
- (3) Amtrak operates 15 long-distance trains over 18,500 route miles that serve 39 States and the District of Columbia. These trains provide the only rail passenger service to 23 States.
- (4) Amtrak's long-distance trains provide an essential transportation service for many communities and to a significant percentage of the general public.
- (5) Many long-distance trains serve small communities with limited or no significant air or bus service, especially in remote or isolated areas in the United States.
- (6) As a result of airline deregulation and decisions by national bus carriers to leave many communities, rail transportation may provide the only feasible common carrier transportation option for a growing number of areas.
- (7) If long-distance trains were eliminated, 23 States and 243 communities would be left with no intercity passenger rail service and 16 other States would lose some rail service. These trains provide a strong economic benefit for the States and communities that they serve.
- (8) Long-distance trains also provide transportation during periods of severe weather or emergencies that stall other modes of transportation.
- (9) Amtrak provided the only reliable long-distance transportation following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks that grounded air travel.
- (10) The majority of passengers on long-distance trains do not travel between the endpoints, but rather between any combination of cities along the route.
- (11) Passenger trains provide transportation options, mobility for underserved populations, congestion mitigation, and jobs in the areas they serve.
- (12) Passenger rail has a positive impact on the environment compared to other modes of transportation by conserving energy, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and cutting down on other airborne particulate and toxic emissions.
- (13) Amtrak communities that are served use passenger rail and passenger rail stations as a significant source of economic development.
- (14) This division makes meaningful and important reforms to increase the efficiency, profitability and on-time performance of Amtrak's long-distance routes.

#### **(b) SENSE OF THE CONGRESS.—**

It is the sense of the Congress that—

- (1) long-distance passenger rail is a vital and necessary part of our national transportation system and economy; and
- (2) Amtrak should maintain a national passenger rail system, including long-distance routes, that connects the continental United States from coast to coast and from border to border.

## APPENDIX B:

### Explanation of NEC “Operating Profit” Argument

In the past, the operating grant in Amtrak’s budget request was a net of the Northeast Corridor’s (NEC) operating “profit” and losses on the rest of the system. Amtrak’s FY 2015 budget request, by contrast, segments the operating grant into the three service categories – \$618 million in LD losses, \$83 million in losses on state corridors and \$290 million in NEC “profits.” And Amtrak proposes to spend the \$290 million on NEC capital investments.

Similar numbers have been available in previous years; what is new this year is the emphasis—which has inspired some increased criticism of the LD trains—and Amtrak’s proposal to spend the \$290 million on NEC capital investments.

Those advocating LD trains may need to emphasize that the NEC “profit” is only sustainable if the NEC, which gets the majority of Amtrak’s capital investment today, continues to get increasing levels of capital investment. Indeed, Amtrak’s FY 2015 budget request devotes \$445 million in *federal* capital investment to the NEC in addition to the aforementioned \$290 million. Thus it is clear that the mutual interests of states inside and outside the NEC continue, as it is not credible to suggest that Congress would devote \$445 million to NEC capital investment while ending most services outside the NEC.

This fact—and, some would argue, the artificial distinction between operating and capital dollars—makes clear that the economic performances of the NEC and LD trains are not as divergent as many believe.