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IS AMTRAK CUTTING LONG-DISTANCE TRAINS AGAIN, AND WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

By David Peter Alan

Since the COVID-19 virus struck this country (and everywhere else) 2½ years ago, things have been difficult for Amtrak and many of its riders. There were service cuts on the corridors; both on the Northeast Corridor (NEC) and elsewhere. Then came a massive reduction in service on the 14 long-distance trains that are available to non-motorists and motorists alike (the Auto-Train, which requires a vehicle, always ran every day). Instead of daily service, the rest of the trains were reduced to tri-weekly schedules; a 57% reduction in service.

Next-day connections from one long-distance train to another became a matter of luck. Sometimes there was no

connection for two or three days. It probably cost Amtrak money, too, as more crews had to be sent to their starting locations and from their ending locations in vans operated for the purpose. Mobility generally, and long-distance travel on Amtrak in particular, had taken a massive hit. This writer chronicled the possible demise of the entire long-distance network in a multi-part series on the *Railway Age* website, www.railwayage.com. The series was collectively titled "Farewell, Long-Distance Trains?" and it was not clear at the time that daily service would ever return.

Then, at the end of 2020, Congress stepped in with the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL). There was money that

would be spent for Amtrak and for transit, among many other purposes. There was also a provision that required Amtrak to restore daily operation to trains that ran every day during the pre-COVID era. At least, that provision purported to require Amtrak to restore such service. Section 7101(c)(1) appropriated \$165,926,000 for Amtrak to "restore, not later than 90 days after the date of enactment of this Act, the frequency of rail service on long-distance routes ... that the National Railroad Passenger Corporation reduced the frequency of on or after July 1, 2020, and continue to operate such service at such frequency" and (2) to "recall and manage" employees furloughed on or after October 1, 2020. That provision

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SAVE THE DATE FOR RUN'S ANNUAL MEETING / VIRTUAL MINI-CONFERENCE:

"SOUTHERN COMFORT—HOW NEW & EXPANDED RAIL SERVICE WILL IMPROVE THE LIVES OF EVERYONE IN THE SOUTHERN U.S."

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2022, 12:30 PM – 5:00 PM (EDT)

By Richard Rudolph, Chair, Rail Users' Network

Please join us at the Rail Users' Network's Annual Meeting / Virtual Conference, taking place on Friday, October 29 from 12:30 pm - 5:00 pm. This exciting event will highlight the ongoing efforts of rail advocates to improve and expand passenger rail service in the Southern U.S.

The program will begin with opening remarks given by RUN's Chair, Dr. Richard Rudolph, who will briefly talk about RUN's current activities and some of the latest challenges that rail advocates are currently facing across North America.

The roster of speakers includes:

- Joanna Campbell, Assistant Division Director, Intermodal

Division at Georgia Department of Transportation. She will describe the scope of the \$8-million feasibility project underway for the possible extension of passenger rail service from Atlanta to Savannah, GA.

- Alan Drake, a RUN member who is one of the leading American experts on railroad

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YOU CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE: MBTA FULLY CLOSES MAJOR SUBWAY LINES FOR A MONTH

By *Dennis Kirkpatrick*

We have a lot of word phrases that have crept into our lexicon over time. We never think of them but use them often. "See you later" is one, and things like "Good night," we don't even think about. The one old bromide that some of us use when giving directions is "You can't get there from here," but often as a matter of humor rather than one of intent. Nothing fits the situation more than this one phrase as the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) in Boston has closed two of its major subway lines, the Orange Line and Green Line, and those will remain closed for a full month.

The MBTA has been plagued with increasing mechanical and service problems including occasional low-speed derailments, failing subway trains (some of which are over 45 years old), a major train fire after a "sill plate" positioned over a third rail pick-up shoe dislodged and shorted to the 600-volt supply at track level, and one very tragic incident on the Red Line when a subway passenger was caught partway through a boarding door and was dragged to their death in the tunnel. Add to this new equipment from China Rail and Rolling Stock Corporation (CRRC) having cut-in issues, the stage is set for failure of unprecedented proportions.

Needless to say, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) stepped in to see what was happening after the passenger death, and from that point on, the laundry-list of problems came into being and federal mandates were set. Among the failures were rolling stock repairs that were put off, multiple sections of trackage that had speed restrictions due to deteriorating rail and sleepers (railroad ties), and a lack of sufficiently trained dispatchers at the system's control center. At least one report coming from the FTA included an incident of one dispatcher recently working a 20-hour shift.

As we went to press for this issue at the end of August, the MBTA was in proximity to a federal takeover. In fact, that was being advanced by Massachusetts Congressman Stephen Lynch (D-MA), who noted in a recent television interview that the MBTA had over 900 staff openings that they had not filled or could not fill. Indeed, working for this transit and commuter rail company seems to no longer be a desirable job. The MBTA is actually offering sign-up bonuses in the thousands of dollars for both rail and bus operators, but getting few takers.

On Friday night, August 19 at 9:00 PM, the MBTA shut down the full length of the Orange Line subway for extensive and around-the-clock repairs. According to MBTA general manager Stephen Poftak, they believe that this 30-day closure will allow extensive repairs to be completed, and roll up as much as 5 years' worth of part-time work that might otherwise be staggered out on nights and weekends during short spans of non-service hours.

The line operates from Boston's Jamaica Plain section of the city to the south, to the City of Malden at its northern terminus. At the line's center is downtown Boston, the state capital. The work will include rail and sleeper replacement, station repairs, and completion of expansion of its Wellington yard and repair shop to accommodate the acceptance of the remainder of new rolling stock, and bringing new people on board. The closure will last until Monday morning at 5:00 AM, on September 19, at which time they plan to re-open to normal service, and with additional new rolling stock on the rails.

In the two weeks preceding the closure, the MBTA and leaderships from impacted communities set forth plans for a massive wave of replacement shuttle buses. Since the MBTA does not have enough bus stock and operators to handle the shuttle needs, private

carriers have been contracted both locally and from adjacent states. The shuttles will not make all Orange Line stops but will get as close as they can to impacted stations, given available streets on which they can travel. As a colonial-era city, Boston has many narrow streets, especially downtown Boston.

The MBTA also hosted several virtual on-line educational sessions via the Zoom application to bring people up to speed on the repair plans and alternate transportation options via parallel transit options, such as the Green Line, or other surface bus routes. Even so, confusion of the ridership has persisted, since many have never learned alternate routes to and from work.

As part of the shutdown, Boston and some surrounding communities have installed temporary bus lanes to help the private carriers get to their destinations. The hope is that the shuttles will have a better chance to get through choke points in what many believe will be gridlock traffic. In fact, the traffic impact map published by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, suggests all of Boston and immediate surrounding communities will be in a "red zone" where movement will be slow or at a standstill.

Bicycle groups that have been lobbying Boston and vicinity strongly for their share of the roadways with their own dedicated lanes have commenced driving in small packs for safety when maneuvering in traffic. Bicycle lanes in Boston are a relatively new addition to some roadways and the vehicular public has yet to fully embrace or understand it, leading to some accidents.

Needless to say, many riders have taken to social media to vent their frustrations over the constant problems. Many have taken photos of service interruption signs posted by the MBTA, adding their own text and images in satirical response. (*See page 7.*)

As if this was not enough, one week after the closure of the Orange Line, the MBTA also closed the northern segment

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NOTES FROM NEW YORK

By **Andrew Albert**

Congestion Pricing

The very controversial but important Congestion Pricing program has taken over the airways, politician's soundbites and all types of news interviews. This program would toll all drivers entering Manhattan's central business district—the area south of 60th Street—at various hours on various days of the week. Depending on how many exemptions are granted, this charge could range from \$9 to \$23 per day. Trucks and larger vehicles would be charged a greater fee, as opposed to passenger cars. Peak hours would be 6 A.M. to 8 P.M., but different hours on weekends.

The monies raised would go to fund the MTA's \$52-billion Capital Program, which is essential to the upkeep and expansion of our amazing transportation system. This money would provide for upkeep of the existing system, expansion possibilities, new tracks, new signals, new rolling stock, new stations,

new ACCESSIBLE stations, and more. One of the other great things about Congestion Pricing is that because it is funding the capital program, "Pay-Go Capital" monies—which come out of the operating budget and go to the capital budget—would remain in the operating budget, thus providing more of a "cushion," thus relieving pressure on service and fares.

One of the most controversial parts of the program—and the part being furiously fought by NJ elected officials—would be to add the "congestion fee" to the tolls already paid by commuters from NJ, thus possibly (depending on the congestion fee decided on) amounting to between \$23 & \$34 per day. This congestion fee on top of tolls would also apply to commuters using the Hugh Carey Tunnel, and the Queens-Midtown Tunnel. One of the options the Traffic Mobility Review Board will consider is not double-charging drivers who have already paid tolls, but giving commuters "credit" for the tolls paid, and subtracting the congestion fee. There are many other options being considered, such as one fee a day, but

then multiple trips could be taken in & out of the congestion zone, special dispensation for Manhattan residents who live within the congestion zone, credit on the George Washington Bridge, which while not feeding into the congestion zone, allows vehicles to travel south on the Henry Hudson Parkway into the zone, plus many many other options. All of these will be considered by the TMRB, but who makes up this very important committee?

The Traffic Mobility Review Board consists of five individuals selected by the MTA, and one by Mayor Eric Adams. Carl Weisbrod is the Chair of the group. Mr. Weisbrod has been Chair of the NYC Planning Commission, a former MTA Board Member, and a resident of Manhattan. John Banks is the former President of the Real Estate Board of NY, and a former MTA Board Member. Mr. Banks resides in Westchester County. Scott Rechler is the Chair of the Regional Plan Association as well as CEO of RXR, a real estate organization. Mr. Rechler was also a former MTA Board Member
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The Rail Users' Newsletter is published quarterly by the Rail Users' Network, a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit corporation. Current board members include:

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Chuck Bode, Membership Secretary	Philadelphia, PA	Tri-State Citizens' Council on Transportation
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Please send comments, letters to editor or articles for possible publications to the Rail Users' Network at:
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FROM NEW MEXICO

By JW Madison


Good News about the New Mexico Rail Runner Express (NMRX)

I'm more than pleased to report a piece of exciting news on the New Mexico regional / commuter Rail front; other than that our Rail Runner simply still exists. Here is a summary of improvements presently under way to our NMRX:


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Rail Capital: CTC and Main 2 Extension 3

- ▶ Gives dispatch direct control of signals and newly powered switches; eliminates the need to manually throw switches and improves safety
- ▶ Will reduce travel time and improve on-time performance
 - ▶ Increase speed from 20 mph to 50 (max 60) mph
 - ▶ Add passing capacity / double track in a highly congested track segment
- ▶ Status: Final engineering underway, CE anticipated in June
- ▶ \$17.0 million in FY2023




The map displays the proposed CTC installation and Main 2 Extension routes in Albuquerque, NM. Key locations marked include the Maintenance Station, CP Station (RR 1), Albuquerque Station, Albuquerque Station, and Rail Runner Yard. A scale of 1 in = 1 mile is provided.




Rail Capital: Double Track 5

- ▶ Double Track Study goal: Strategically target track improvements that most improve Rail Runner travel times and schedule flexibility
- ▶ Seven operating scenarios were assessed (Hourly Service, Peak Express, Staggered Express, etc.)
- ▶ Ross Siding in FY2024 (\$14 million), \$42 million in FY2025 – FY 2029



The diagram, titled 'Proposed Projects', shows a vertical line representing the rail route with various project locations marked. Key locations include Ross Siding, Albuquerque Station, and various yards. The diagram includes callouts for 'Proposed for hourly service' and 'Proposed for peak express' at different points along the line.



LACKAWANNA COALITION HEADS TOWARD STATEWIDE PURVIEW AMID CONCERNS ABOUT RIDERS WITH DISABILITIES

By *David Peter Alan*

After historic “No” votes on two contracts for bus operations, the New Jersey Transit (NJT) Board of Directors has returned to “business as usual”; agreeing with all management proposals often in unanimous “rubber stamp” fashion. That includes approving high-cost items like a new Portal North Bridge and other projects earmarked to create additional capacity for commuters at historic “peak-hours” despite weak ridership during those times, which remains far below pre-COVID levels.

Recently, the agency and its riders suffered a major service disruption on Friday, June 17. Members of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) called in sick in large numbers that day and during the following weekend. The Newark-based Star-Ledger reported that 205 marked off on Friday, 143 on Saturday, and 133 on Sunday. The agency employs about 400 engineers. Service disruptions were severe, especially on Friday, when all rail lines shut down at about 7:30 or 8:00 P.M. Most rail lines normally run until about 1:00 A.M. The dispute centered on pay for the new Juneteenth holiday, which New Jersey designated for that Friday, but the federal government designated for the following Monday. NJT later got a court order, which ended the job action.

Lackawanna Coalition Chairperson Sally Jane Gellert criticized management’s response, writing in the Coalition’s newsletter, the *Railgram*: “Shutting down all cross-Hudson trains for hours – virtually the entire system, and not even opening phone lines to assist routine rail riders with alternate options – shows a lack of concern for customers that is simply not acceptable.”

In the meantime, the Coalition is showing increased concern about riders with disabilities. NJT held an “Accessibility Forum” on June 14, but technical problems with online participation prevented a number of concerned persons from having their

say. Nobody disputed that such an event was a good idea in theory, but Gellert termed the event “not a success” because of the difficulties with its execution. She reported in the *Railgram*: “a large number of presenters discussed accessibility arrangements for various modes of NJ Transit transportation, from new software programs to equipment, and a lot of good

The New Jersey Transit Board of Directors has returned to “business as usual”; agreeing with all management proposals often in unanimous “rubber stamp” fashion.

information was shared. The closing portion was public Q&A, limited to the information just presented, which some found a frustrating limitation.” There is also a plan to run a lead article about NJT and its riders with disabilities in the upcoming issue of the *Railgram*.

The Coalition has also held two “inspection trips” for its members and some members of the NJT Senior Citizens and Disabled Residents Transportation Advisory Committee (SCDRTAC). The two organizations have several members in common. One trip covered the Morris & Essex and Montclair-Boonton Lines, while the other covered the North Jersey Coast Line. Members of both organizations from South Jersey and Philadelphia joined longtime Coalition members from North and Central Jersey to take a close look at rail lines they don’t ride regularly, and to enjoy a bit of local color and food in the towns along the lines. The Coalition is planning more such trips this fall.

Also this fall, the Coalition is hoping to host an “outreach” meeting for Essex County’s planning initiative for 2045. The county has hired consultants to recommend transportation initiatives during the next 23 years.

There are two other issues of interest pending in the Garden State. One is environmental in nature, while the other concerns the proposal for a Congestion Pricing toll for private vehicles entering Midtown Manhattan or points south.

Environmentalists, including Gellert, are upset because NJ Transit is proposing its “NJTransitGrid” project with a power plant fired by natural gas, despite Gov. Phil Murphy’s campaign promise to use renewable energy sources instead of fossil fuels. The Don’t Gas the Meadowlands Coalition, an environmental-advocacy group, won a promise from the governor to modify the TransitGrid proposal – but the agency subsequently posted an RFP designed for a centralized gas plant.

The group has held demonstrations, including a rally at NJT headquarters coinciding with a meeting of the agency’s Board of Directors and a march to the headquarters building as part of the recent “Gov. Murphy Walk Your Talk on Climate” week of action.

While New York officials are working on implementing a Congestion Tolling plan that they expect will reduce vehicle traffic in Manhattan while providing more funds for the MTA’s capital program, Murphy came to the defense of New Jersey motorists who take their vehicles into Manhattan, as did other politicians in the state. Although he essentially controls NJT through his appointees to the Board and senior management, he has not yet recommended to his fellow New Jerseyans that they take NJT’s trains or buses into the City to avoid the congestion toll, which would mean a less-expensive trip.

David Peter Alan is a RUN Board member and Chair Emeritus of the Lackawanna Coalition in Millburn, NJ. He is a contributing editor to Railway Age.

SEPTA RETURNS TO WAWA

By Chuck Bode

When train 3858 departed from Wawa station at 6:10 A.M. on Sunday August 21, 2022, it marked a resumption of service, three miles from Elwyn to Wawa. Service to West Chester ended in 1986 when SEPTA was unable to find a repair that could keep the old jointed rails safe for service at more than minimal speed. It was the old story of lack of maintenance caused by poverty, first PRR, then Penn Central, and finally SEPTA.

For a while, freight service continued to a ballast quarry supplying Amtrak. More recently, a railfan operation provides excursions on the western portion of the line. Between Elwyn station and the railfan operation, the line became dormant. Occasional efforts were made to restore service, always ending in failure.

Finally, about six years ago, serious work got underway to do a proper rehabilitation from Elwyn to Wawa, about a quarter of the way to West Chester. Welded rail replaced the old, beyond-repair rails. PTC was installed. A high level platform for two tracks was built at Wawa along with a large parking garage. There are a few benches on the platform, unfortunately not under the roof. A yard for overnight storage was also built just before Wawa station.

Nineteen eastbound trains leave Wawa between 4:43am and 11:08pm weekdays. Six additional trains start at Media and one at Elwyn. Three eastbound morning trains operate express part of the way. Westbound twenty-one trains arrive at Wawa on weekdays between 7:48 A.M. and 12:43 A.M. the next morning, two of them express. Four trains go as far as Media and one to Elwyn.

Weekend service is 12 trains each direction. All serve Wawa, eastbound departing from 6:10 A.M. to 10:10 P.M. and arriving westbound from 7:28 A.M. until 11:38 P.M. Service is basically every 2 hours, with 3 additional trains at busier travel times.



TOP PICTURE, looking northwest, shows car 813 waiting to depart at 4:10 P.M. Sunday, August 21, 2022. To the left of the railing is the wheelchair ramp. A small part of the parking garage is on the right. The open space on the right is where Chester Creek flows under the station. BOTTOM PICTURE, looking southeast, shows the platform, benches, and signals on Sunday, August 21, 2022. The trees on the right side mark the right of way of the Octoraro branch, wiped out in this area by a hurricane in 1972.

Older timetables, with service ending at Elwyn, show the changes. The previous timetable had 23 eastbound and 22 westbound weekday trains along with 9 each way on weekends. Pre-pandemic, the September 14, 2014 schedule had 29 eastbound trains, although two started at Secane, 26 westbound, 17 each way Saturdays and 14 each way Sundays. Outside of peak periods service was about once an hour.

Way back, the April 30, 1967 PRR timetable indicated "SEPTA - for improved regional transportation." This was when all

trains showed in one table with notes for the days of operation, all in tiny print. Attempting to decode it, there seem to have been about 37 weekday, 26 Saturday, and 12 Sunday trains as far as Media. Beyond Media to West Chester, there seem to have been 11 weekday, 2 Saturday, and no Sunday trains.

9.4 more miles from Wawa to West Chester. Will trains ever return?

Chuck Bode is a RUN Board member and member of the Tri-State Citizens' Council on Transportation.

BUSY SUMMER OF TRACK REPAIR IN PHILADELPHIA

By **Chuck Bode**

Summer 2022 has been busy for SEPTA's track crew. On the railroad lines, several July and August weekends and one full week in August were used for upgrades just beyond University City Station. Buses replaced some trains, other trains used the lower-level Amtrak platforms at 30th Street Station, while a multitude of SEPTA staff worked to get passengers in their intended direction.

Work on streetcar track continued for half the year. The big project is the annual Trolley Blitz, this year from July 8 through July 25. This now annual event is used to keep the subway surface tunnel in good repair. East of 22nd Street the tunnel is over 110 years old, while the "new" section west of 22nd Street is over 60 years old. For many years, maintenance, to the extent it could be done, was performed during a once a week 3-hour closure Thursday from 2 to 5 A.M., a few years ago changed to a longer 10 P.M. Sunday to 5 A.M. Monday. The eventual accumulation of deferred maintenance resulted in service issues. A few years ago, SEPTA initiated the bold action of a one- to two-week midsummer closure of the tunnel so that proper repairs and upgrades can be done. As a regular rider, there seem to be fewer disruptions since SEPTA began the Blitzes.

When the tunnel is closed, streetcars "divert" over what remains of the old Route 40 track to the 40th Street station on the MFSE line. Route 40 was converted to buses in the 1950s. Thus, some of the track which has been untouched since then might charitably be described as ancient. Over the years, part of the track has been replaced including Spruce and 38th Streets. This summer, the track was replaced on 40th Street during two work periods, one before and one after the Blitz.

This would typically be an unremarkable event. However, to the best that can be

determined, this undisturbed track was the last streetcar track in continuous passenger carrying service in the U.S. still paved with Belgian Blocks. After activists began a campaign to retain the paving, historian Peggy Hartzel of Chester County provided research that this paving was even more significant. Slaves freed by the Civil War came north to work in the Belgian Block quarries, where they made more money than at Southern jobs. Thus, this section of track may also have been the last connection between slaves and street railways. As expected, SEPTA had no interest in history and the blocks were hauled away to be replaced with concrete.

Trackwork will continue until the end of the year, as SEPTA rebuilds Route 15 track on 26th Street and on Girard Avenue from 26th to 33rd Street.

Hopefully, SEPTA's hard work can keep Philadelphia from emulating Boston, where deferred maintenance has recently resulted in major service disruptions.

Chuck Bode is a RUN Board member and member of the Tri-State Citizens' Council on Transportation.

YOU CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

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of the Green Line subway, which is populated by streetcars operating both on the surface and underground. All Green Line trains will proceed into downtown Boston from their southern and western branches and terminate at either Park Street or Government Center stations in the downtown district. This closes off the northern segment and the recently opened Green Line extension to Union Square. It will also push out the opening of that extension's branch into the City of Medford by several months.

The reason for the closure of this line is to accommodate the demolition of the Government Center Garage which is being transformed into a new high-rise. Both the Green and Orange Line subways travel underneath this structure or in proximity. The two subways were closed for several days several months ago when a "bobcat" construction vehicle careened multiple stories from the demolition site and fell multiple stories, killing the operator. The vehicle and debris fell on top of the Haymarket subway station and the tunnels needed extensive safety checks before it was deemed possible to return train traffic. The hope is that by accommodating the construction company, the major demolition work will be completed, allowing the transit system to fully resume service without additional disruption under the work area.

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ORANGE LINE

Service Change

No Orange Line Service 8/19-9/16

You Can't Get There From Here

Building a better T.
MBTA.com/alerts

"You Can't Get There From Here" is one of dozens of memes found in social media as part of the public's satirical response to the MBTA's closures. To say people are unhappy and frustrated is an understatement.

IS AMTRAK CUTTING LONG-DISTANCE TRAINS AGAIN?

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did not apply to the *Sunset Limited* or the *Cardinal*, because they had operated on tri-weekly schedules for decades.

While the trains did not return to daily operation by Memorial Day weekend in 2021, they were back by early June. For almost eight months, the long-distance trains ran almost every day, but Amtrak announced that service would again be slashed in late January of this year, to five days per week on all long-distance routes (again, except the Auto-Train, which is available only to motorists with a vehicle). It was supposed to be a temporary measure, for nine weeks, and daily operation was supposed to come back to every affected route at the end of March.

It did not happen that way. Only three trains (the *Coast Starlight*, along with the *Capitol Limited* and the *Texas Eagle*, which shared consists), returned to daily operation at that time. In the Southeast, the *Silver Star* to Florida and the *Palmetto* to Savannah were restored to daily service, but the *Silver Meteor*, the other Florida train, was suspended entirely. As March turned to April, I covered a rail conference sponsored by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) for Railway Age. I asked about Amtrak's refusal to implement the promised return of daily service. Amtrak claimed that shortages of employees prevented them from restoring the trains. The word from Congressional staffers at the conference was that Amtrak was to be given a pass on promised restorations, based on that claim.

By the summer, the three trains from Chicago to the West Coast were running every day, as was the *Lakeshore Limited* to New York. The South was not so lucky. The *Silver Meteor* would remain suspended until September 11, and the formerly-daily New Orleans trains (the *City of New Orleans* to Chicago and the

Crescent to New York) would remain on five-day schedules until that date. The purported deadline came and went, and Amtrak extended the promised date for full service until October 2. That is where the long-distance network stands at this writing.

It has been a bad summer in other respects, too. Many trains have been running shorter consists than has been customary, despite demand that has exceeded the level from the past two summers. We have received reports of trains between Chicago and the West Coast running with only two coaches; normally a winter consist, when a summer consist would carry up to four before the virus struck. The Sightseer Lounge cars that once ran on the *Texas Eagle* and *Capitol Limited* have not returned. Dining cars are again in the consists of the trains running west of Chicago or New Orleans (except the "Eagle"), but coach passengers are no longer permitted to purchase a meal or even enter the dining car.

To make matters worse, there have been reports of cars backed up at the Amtrak shops at Beech Grove, IN for repairs. A few recent wrecks have not helped, either.

All of this might add up to severe trouble for Amtrak's skeletal long-distance network. A reliable source in rail-blogging circles has reported that Amtrak is considering cutting service again this fall, either to five days a week, or even to three, on the entire long-distance network available to both non-motorists and motorists. Thus far, that report remains unconfirmed, and we don't want to sound the alarm quite yet. Still, any well-informed observer of the current Amtrak scene has at least some reason to be apprehensive about the future of the trains.

So, what can advocates and other concerned riders do about the impending situation?

As has often been the case with Amtrak, this is a political situation. Many advocates outside the Northeast have claimed that Amtrak is favoring the NEC, at the expense of the long-distance network.

Looking at the facts, the shorter-distance trains have done better than the long-distance network, when it comes to having service restored. There are still a few trains missing from the old schedule on the NEC and elsewhere, but most service in other places has been restored to pre-COVID levels.

Whether other Amtrak services may soon be in jeopardy, or whether that risk falls only on the long-distance routes, Congress ordered Amtrak to restore service to pre-COVID levels, and it appears that Amtrak is not complying with that mandate. At this writing, Amtrak is at least out of compliance when it comes to some trains in the South; the region that will be the subject of the upcoming RUN conference on October 29.

So, the place to start with any action is with Congress. As we have reported before, most Northeastern states are "blue" states, where Democrats dominate. That means Amtrak has strong backing from Democrats in the region. Most corridors elsewhere run in "blue" states, including Illinois and states on the West Coast. A few state-supported corridors and single-frequency routes run in "purple" states: Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina and Michigan. There are no corridors and very few state-supported trains in the "red" states, where Republicans dominate.

Most of those states are in the South and West. While there are no corridors in those states, long-distance trains continue to run through them. So, if you live in one of those states, you might make your case to Democrats or to Republicans, depending on who your members of Congress actually are. The most powerful argument you can make is the one that will appeal to either of them. That is the "business case" for trains. Trains, including those on long-distance routes, bring tourists to the people they serve. They also bring regular riders who travel for other purposes, and there are even a few "business travelers" on board if the schedules accommodates such travel. In any event, rail travelers bring money to hotels, restaurants and other

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IS AMTRAK CUTTING LONG-DISTANCE TRAINS AGAIN?

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local businesses in the towns where the train stops, regardless of the purpose of the trips they take. That is probably the most effective argument you can make, and it is probably the only one that could appeal to Republicans.

After all, every elected official, regardless of party, wants more money to flow into their district.

There are other arguments, too: the "social equity and justice" arguments, as well as how trains are good for the environment. I personally believe that these are valid reasons why the country needs more trains. Although I would not advise any advocate against making them, you need to be careful.

For example, some Republicans deny that the climate is changing. Tailor your presentation to the elected officials who will be hearing it and stress the arguments that could be the most effective in persuading that particular person to support more rail service.

Congress holds the power on this issue, but it can't hurt to make the case to state-level officials, too. Federal agencies, especially the STB and possibly the FRA, may have something to say about Amtrak service, so it can't hurt to contact them also. Don't restrict your activities to elected officials either. Local media, both print and broadcast, along with a developed following on social media, can help inform the public and persuade others to support an improved passenger-train network.

Finally, if you find any of these advocacy tools to be particularly effective, please let us know.

RUN is a clearing house for "best practices" regarding advocacy on behalf of an improved passenger-train network, more rail transit, and better connectivity between the two. If you

have made an effective argument or developed a winning strategy, please tell us about it, so we can spread the word .

David Peter Alan is a RUN Board member, and has ridden on every rail transit line in the United States.

SAVE THE DATE FOR RUN'S ANNUAL MEETING / VIRTUAL MINI-CONFERENCE

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electrification, will talk about efforts to expand streetcars in New Orleans.

- Peter LaCody, President, Texas Rail Advocates, will describe the ongoing Fair-Share-For-Rail Campaign to establish a state funding stream needed to participate in competitive federal grant programs for rail projects. He will also provide an update on Amtrak's 2035 vision for Texas and the expansion of the Heartland Flyer and the possible expansion of the Sunset from tri-weekly to daily service.

- Danny Plaugher, Executive Director, Virginians for High Speed Rail, will discuss the "Case for Transforming Rail in Virginia: An overview of the factors that led Virginia to go big on Rail, the milestones that Virginia achieved leading up to the big announcement, and the benefits from the Commonwealth's \$4 billion in investments."

- Michael Cegelis - Executive Vice President, Rail Infrastructure at Brightline Florida, will talk about the construction of the new rail line to connect stops in Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach to Orlando. Service connecting South Florida to Central Florida is expected to open in 2023.

- Knox Ross, Chairman, Southern Rail Commission, will talk about the ongoing work of the Commission and the current restoring Amtrak passenger rail service from New Orleans to Mobile, AL.

- The Florida Coalition of Rail Passengers and current board member Stephen Sayles will speak about the improvements the Coalition is trying to get Amtrak to make in the Sunshine State.

- Martin Wheeler Jr., President, Carolinas Association for Passenger Trains, will describe the effort to rebuild and upgrade the former Seaboard Air Line to a 110 miles per hour maximum speed line from Raleigh, N.C. to Richmond, VA. He will also talk about the effort to extend passenger rail service to Asheville and to eastern North Carolina.

- A spokesperson from MARTA will speak about the organization's efforts to improve and maintain its heavy-rail system and procurement of a new railcar fleet.

- David Peter Alan, Esq., contributing editor to *Railway Age*, who is also a RUN Board Member, will provide closing remarks.

If time allows, the mini-conference will close with a Public Forum, which will enable participants to share their ideas for improving / expanding passenger rail / rail transit services in North America.

Our conference is designed not only for rail advocates, but also civic and business leaders, environmentalists, planners, real estate developers, and members of the general public who are interested in knowing more about passenger rail and rail transit in the southern part of the United States. Please note this is a free event for all Rail Users' Network members, but please be sure to register in advance. The fee for non-members is \$25 that includes a full year 2023 introductory membership to the organization. Be sure to register early. The deadline is October 26, 2022 so that we can send along the info needed to attend RUN's 2022 Fall Virtual Conference. To register, please go to our website at <http://www.railusers.net> and click on the "register" link.

We look forward to your participation. In the meantime, stay safe and well.

NOTES FROM NEW YORK

Continued from page 3

Member. Elizabeth Velez is President of the Velez Organization, a construction services firm. Ms. Velez is currently an MTA Board Member from the Bronx. Kathryn Wylde is President & CEO of the Partnership for New York City, whose members are the city's global business leaders and major employers. John Samuelsen, Mayor Adams' appointment to the TMRB, is the international President of the Transport Workers Union, and currently an MTA Board Member. This is the group that will decide a) fees b) time of day/days of week c) exemptions.

Public hearings are being held on the congestion plan beginning August 25, and lasting until August 31, although comments may be submitted well after that. If approved, it is expected the program could be in effect by late 2023 or early 2024. Court challenges could delay those dates, as could unexpected turns in the November elections. New York would be the first city in the US to utilize congestion pricing, while Europe has several cities that have it. It is expected to markedly improve New York's air quality, ease congestion on our streets, and of course - fund the extremely important MTA Capital Program, which needs a sustainable, dependable source of funding in order to keep our system safe and functioning well. After all, it DOES move 40% of the nation's mass transit users!

East Side Access

Several milestones have been reached in the long-running plan to bring Long Island Rail Road trains into Grand Central Terminal. The new terminal, dubbed "Grand Central Madison," is quite deep underneath the current Lower Level of GCT, and is approximately 17 flights of steps below the street level! There are multiple platforms down there, and trains are already making test runs. Signage is beautiful, and there are multiple elevators/escalators to take you up from the platforms - a trip estimated

to take 7 minutes! Work has been largely completed at Harold Interlocking in Queens, and trains have been tested and successfully routed to Grand Central. This is the first major change in LIRR schedules in over 30 years, and will represent something in the area of a 40% increase in LIRR service!

However—and there's always a "however" —not everyone is happy with the proposed service plan. What it largely does is split existing service between Penn Station and Grand Central, which while a good concept - has some already complaining about reduced service to Penn Station. In addition, there is a lot of complaints on the Port Washington branch, as existing express service from Great Neck, Manhasset, Plandome, & Port Washington will be scheduled to begin local stops in Queens at Bayside, with stops at Douglaston, Little Neck, Great Neck, Manhasset, Plandome, & Port Washington. This could add approximately 8 minutes running time to the schedules, and folks are not happy.

The MTA has said this is due to a lack of storage space at the Port Washington yard, which local officials have refused to expand. That may now change, with the proposed schedules. Another huge complaint is with the Brooklyn service from Jamaica, which is being relegated to a new "Platform F". This means that where riders from east of Jamaica had either a one-seat ride to Atlantic Terminal, or at worst, an across-the-platform transfer at Jamaica to the Brooklyn train, they will now have to go upstairs, walk over to platform F, go down, and get their train to Atlantic Terminal. There may still be some through trains, but it will be nothing like it is now. There will be additional service to Brooklyn, but whether riders will find that minimizes the pain of having to change platforms, time will tell.

Other major improvements have been undertaken on the LIRR as part of the "Third Track" initiative. There has always been just two tracks between Floral Park & Hicksville, which means less service in the opposite direction of predominant

travel, such as eastbound in the mornings, and westbound in the late afternoons. It's been a massive project, but right now there are three tracks between Floral Park & Merillon Avenue stations, with the final section all the way to Hicksville scheduled for completion by October. In conjunction with this work, there has also been many grade crossing eliminations, platform extensions, new signals, and more. For those living in close proximity to the tracks, there is less horn-blowing, as grade crossings were eliminated, less back-ups as roads now go under the tracks, without the wait times for trains to pass, and many other advantages, such as coming service improvements and station improvements. It remains to be seen how the new schedules will work out for everyone, but a 40-45% increase in service is certainly good news for Long Islanders, and those traveling to the Island.

New Train Time App

For those who have used either the Long Island Rail Road's Train Time app to view schedules, check service, or plan a trip, and then tried Metro-North's Train Time app and found it to be different, lacking some of the features of the LIRR app, there is great news! The combined Train Time app lets you see schedules from either railroad, see trains in real time, book & purchase your e-ticket, communicate with MTA personnel, all from the ease of your mobile device! Plus, when the LIRR begins service to Grand Central later this year, you will be able to see/book a ride from Long Island to Westchester, or other northern counties! The app is quite user-friendly, and anyone planning on a ride on either railroad is urged to update your old app ASAP. (There are multiple reminders telling you to do so) It's like having both the Long Island Rail Road & Metro-North Railroad in your pocket!

Andrew Albert is Vice-Chairman of RUN, the Chair of the NYC Transit Riders Council, and Riders' Representative on the MTA Board.

YOU CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

Continued from page 7

Along with the surface shuttle buses handling the Orange Line ridership, some relief is being offered in free rides on connecting commuter rail lines coming into Boston. All trains in fare zones 1, 1A, and 2 will honor the display of a transit fare card, known locally as a "Charlie Card (after the song "Charlie on the MTA") for free trips during the month-long construction period. People outside of those zones will still be responsible for their customary fares.

Unfortunately, the MBTA commuter rail is also short staffed and extra service previously operating at peak service times (rush hours) is no longer scheduled. All commuter rail trains, with few exceptions, are now operating on a weekday standard of one-hour headways throughout the day. On weekends, trains operate on two-hour headways.

That so noted, many of the commuter rail trains will add extra stops along the Orange Line where platforms exist to accommodate the ridership. On the north side commuter rail (Haverhill Line), trains will stop at Oak Grove and Malden Stations on their way to North Station. On the south side, all Needham Line trains and select Providence/Stoughton Line trains will stop at Forest Hills, as well as stations at Ruggles and Back Bay on their way to South Station.

Due to this being a changing situation, with expectations that adjustments will be made during this closure, visitors to the city should visit the MBTA website for the latest changes and alerts at www.mbta.com. For more information about this shutdown, please visit www.mbta.com/riderguide/ for detailed information about shuttles and connection alternatives.

Dennis Kirkpatrick is a RUN Board member in Boston. For 20 years he was the managing editor of Destination: Freedom, the weekly E-Zine of the National Corridors Initiative.

FROM NEW MEXICO

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And Now Back to Normal

Our Rail Runner's existence derives from several decades of persistent activism on the part of a small number of brave souls advocating for commuter Rail between Albuquerque and Santa Fe. As early as the 1980s, our then-Governor Toney Anaya was damn near laughed into an early grave (exaggeration) for his public advocacy of this service.

About the year 2000, the newly-founded Rails Inc pushed for beginning the service between Belen and Bernalillo, via Albuquerque, owing to the existence of good trackage (then hosting significant BNSF freight traffic) and a large potential passenger base among commuters and students. Santa Fe after that. Rails Inc got this notion from a study conducted in 1996 by the EP Hamilton Company of Pflugerville, TX (near Austin), and called "A Transportation Transformation; Market Test Project Feasibility Study." We consider this our Old Testament, and Rails Inc was founded in part to spread this study around.

Gubernatorial candidate Bill Richardson listened to these longtime activists, including upstart Rails Inc, who as part of their presentations, handed him this study. Upon his election in 2002, he instigated the Rail Runner in record time.

Rails Inc is trying to instigate a "Transportation Transformation" -type study toward the goal of reviving Gov. Richardson's late-in-office effort to buy for the state of NM the Lamy-Raton Pass track segment from the BNSF; an effort that went as far as initial "earnest money" changing hands. His successor, Susanna Martinez, killed the deal. We have been in touch with two of the same people who realized the EP Hamilton study. We're seeking a kind of contractor's cost estimate for this potential new study. No answer yet. Remember, this track purchase deal was already in the works; not just a study subject. Nothing has changed much since 2009 except that the need for this publicly-owned infrastructure is all the greater.

JW Madison is a RUN Board member and president of Rails Inc in Albuquerque, NM, and solidarity member of the RWU.

RESTORING RAIL PASSENGER SERVICE TO READING, PA

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scheduled to arrive in Pottstown at 12:50 P.M. and 1:20 P.M. in Reading. Another bus departs from Philadelphia at 5:55 P.M.. and is scheduled to arrive at 7:10 P.M.. in Pottstown and a half hour later in Reading..

Meanwhile, efforts to restore passenger rail service between Reading and Philadelphia have taken another step forward. At the first meeting of the new Schuylkill River Passenger Rail Authority, Christian Leinbach, the Berks County Commissioner, was chosen to serve as chairman with Chester County Commissioner Marian Moskowitz as Vice Chair. The authority also agreed to prepare a letter of intent to the Federal Railroad Administration to restore the service. It is a prelude to an application to FRA's new Corridor Identification Program, which will serve "as a key vehicle for directing federal investments and technical assistance toward new or improved intercity passenger rail services across the nation."

FRA hopes this new program will establish a pipeline of projects ready for funding—allowing them to be implemented faster and with greater coordination than ever before. Once routes are selected, "the FRA will work with applicants to create a service development plan with schedules based on necessary capital investments to insure a routes' viability." However, funding will only be provided for pre-construction development "which may include planning, environmental review, preliminary engineering and other corridor development activities." As applicants are required to provide at least a 20% match to secure federal funding, it remains to be seen whether the new rail authority will be able to raise the funds or convince the state to provide the necessary match and to cover costs beyond the pre-engineering phase of development.

While it is too early to know what will happen going forward, this writer believes the Schuylkill River Passenger Rail Authority is likely to succeed in its effort to obtain funding from the FRA since it meets most of the criteria spelled out in the new fourteen-point program, including a completed feasibility study, and has state government support and is listed as an unfunded project in the latest Penn State Rail Plan.

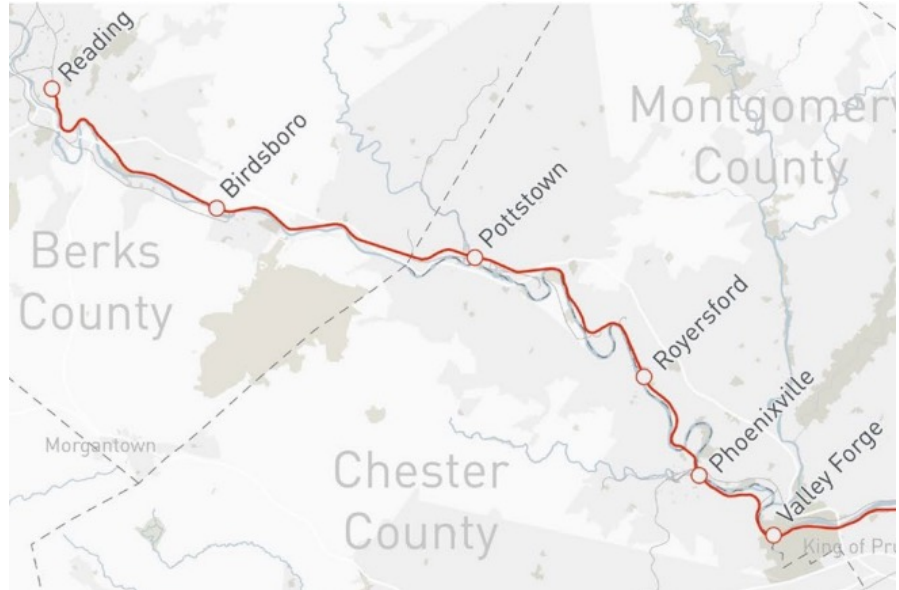
RESTORING RAIL PASSENGER SERVICE TO READING, PA

By Richard Rudolph, Ph.D., Chairman,
Rail Users' Network
Passenger Train Journal, 2022-4

This is the first of several columns that will focus on Amtrak's 2035 Connect US plan at the state and regional level. The projects are part of Amtrak's strategic plan to add as many as 38 new rail routes by 2035. The Infrastructure and Jobs Act, passed last year, contained \$66 billion for Amtrak, including money to restore discontinued routes as well as to begin serving new destinations.

Pennsylvania could ultimately be one of a few states that will actually see additional service. This could include additional frequencies along the Keystone Route to Harrisburg, a second frequency to Pittsburgh and possible extension of the service to Cleveland. Three other routes in Eastern Pennsylvania that were abandoned decades ago may also be restored, including service to Reading, Allentown and Scranton. The focus of this article is on the current effort underway to restore service to Reading, Pennsylvania, which began in the mid-1800s. Initially operated by the Reading Railroad, and then by ConRail under contract to SEPTA, service was suspended in 1981 during SEPTA's transition to an all-electric network. Service from Norristown to Reading used diesel equipment until it was discontinued.

Although "there were no tears, no sighs, only cameras clicking as the final commuter train providing service on the Reading, Pottsville - Norristown line inched slowly into the Franklin Street Station on its last scheduled run from the Reading Terminal at 12th and Market Street in Philadelphia on June 30, 1981," the idea of rail service has not been forgotten. Community leaders, elected officials and other folks have attempted many times over the past four decades to restore service



from Reading to Philadelphia without much success. Four different studies were completed during the first decade of the 21st Century. While these studies indicated continued interest in establishing service beyond Norristown to Reading, significant challenges were identified. The rail line is a freight corridor owned by Norfolk Southern (NS), which indicated the restoration of rail service on its corridor is inconsistent with its business goals; and the corridor west of Norristown is not electrified, thereby making single-seat service into Center City Philadelphia complicated to implement.

The following describes the most recent efforts. PennDOT initiated a Philadelphia Rail Analysis during the last decade and issued a final report in December 2020. The analysis explored feasible alternatives, necessary capital improvements and next steps required to initiate service based on several assumptions that were made at the study's onset. They included using SEPTA's Main line from Center City, Philadelphia, and its Norristown Line to Norristown and Norfolk Southern Schuylkill River Bridge and Harrisburg Line to Reading. Preference was given for a direct Reading-to-Philadelphia one-seat ride using dual powered equipment, since the corridor from

Reading to Norristown is not electrified.

SEPTA was the assumed operator, considering its existing regional rail service and ownership of the Norristown Line, as well as having a lower cost structure in comparison to Amtrak, but this issue could be reconsidered in the future as planning efforts advance. Daily ridership was estimated on pre-COVID commuter data and ranged from 3,400 to 6,400 for passengers boarding or alighting on the Reading-to-Norristown portion of the corridor. Riders who travel exclusively on the Norristown-to-Philadelphia portion of the corridor weren't included.

The study also pointed out a number of challenges that would need to be overcome. They included: NS willingness to be a party to negotiate access to the corridor that they own from Reading to Norristown and the fees to be charged and capacity and capital improvements needed to accommodate passenger operations. Total capital cost could be quite high: one estimate, which was not an all-inclusive estimate, was \$818 million.

A third track may be needed between Norristown and Reading to reduce

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RESTORING RAIL PASSENGER SERVICE TO READING, PA

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potential freight conflicts and there is the need for widening the Black Rock Tunnel, which can only safely accommodate a single track. There was also the question of whether SEPTA's Norristown to Philadelphia route could accommodate additional trains under current operating and infrastructure conditions. The Norristown Corridor already serves 55 daily trains and joins SEPTA's Main Line at 16th Street Junction on which 350 daily scheduled trains operate. Estimated annual O&M costs ranged from \$18 million to \$25 million in 2020 dollars.

The Berks Alliance, formed in 2015 in collaboration with the Greater Reading Chamber Alliance, also issued a preliminary study: *Restoring Passenger Rail Service to Berks County, PA*. Given their interest in promoting community development, the two alliances contracted with Transportation Economics & Management Systems (TEMS) based in Frederick, MD to conduct an \$80,000 study to provide a pre-feasibility level of understanding of the basics of operating a passenger rail service from Reading to Philadelphia. This included the ability to provide direct rail connections to New York and Washington, D.C.

The results of this study identified a strong case for restoration of passenger rail service using NS Railway, which runs freight trains over the track through Reading and SEPTA's track from Norristown to west of Ivy Ridge Station. From there, a new track connection called DP Dutch could provide a link to the abandoned PRR line from Reading, a short piece of which could be rebuilt, then continuing over SEPTA's Cynwyd line and Amtrak's Harrisburg line, providing direct access to 30th Street Station. This would eliminate

the need to go through the Center City tunnels at a cost estimate of \$356 million.

The restoration of service would produce substantial economic benefits for all the communities along the line, including jobs, income and property development opportunities. The study estimated that the economic benefits would generate nearly \$1.4 billion of increased income and create over 28,000 person years of new jobs. Property values would also increase by \$1.1 billion and new development would occur along the corridor and stimulate redevelopment adjacent to the proposed stations. In addition, the project would benefit travelers who plan to travel on Amtrak's Northeast Corridor to Washington., D.C. or to New York and Boston. This new rail system would also effectively connect Reading with convenient rail access to the Philadelphia, Newark Liberty and Baltimore/Washington Airports.

To move the project forward as a public or public/private project, TEMS advised the completion of two steps: "First, a Blue Print study to create the institutional framework and agreements with key stake holders such as Norfolk Southern and second, a Tier 1 Environmental Impact Study (EIS) to develop the clearance for Federal funding." The Blue Print study would define the optional approach to the development of the corridor and provide the documentation needed for Pennsylvania to be able to apply for federal funding. The Tier 1 EIS would develop a Service Development Plan and a NEPA Environmental Scan.

The passage of President Biden's Infrastructure and Jobs Act last year as well as Amtrak's 2035 rail plan has sparked further interest in restoring passenger service from Reading to Philadelphia. In fact, it has led to the creation of the Schuylkill River Passenger Rail Authority. Proponents who served on a Tri-County Passenger Rail Committee made

up of a county commissioner from each of the three counties, along with other local officials spent last year exploring "the most efficient manner to restore passenger rail service to the region." They convinced the other Commissioners in Berks, Chester and Montgomery Counties to hold public hearings in April of this year regarding the formation of a joint Schuylkill River Passenger Rail Authority. They believe creating an authority is key to restoring passenger service, for it will provide legitimacy in competitive efforts to obtain infrastructure funding, and have the power to receive federal funding and be able to spend money to develop plans and work directly with organizations such as Amtrak, PennDOT, the FRA and other necessary partners.

At each of the public meetings, the county commissioners heard a groundswell of support for restoring passenger service, as many residents, business owners and community leaders voiced their excitement about the prospect of the return of passenger rail, with possible station stops in Reading, Birdsboro, Pottstown, Phoenixville, Royersford, Valley Forge, Norristown and Philadelphia. All three county commissions voted to create the authority and have contributed \$100,000 each. Three members were appointed by each county with reauthorization in three years. This will give county officials time to determine whether the authority is a worthwhile effort.

Amtrak has also started a new express bus service linking Reading and Pottstown to Philadelphia and the rest of its national passenger rail network providing two roundtrips per day. The new service debuted a few weeks after the three counties formed the new rail authority. The fee for the new service is \$14 one way from Reading and \$9 from Pottstown. Eastbound bus service departs Reading at 7 A.M. and 7:30 A.M. from Pottstown, arriving Market and 30th Street at 8:55 A.M.. Another leaves Reading at 2 P.M. and Pottstown at 2:30 P.M. and reaches Philadelphia at 3:55 p.m. Westbound, the bus leaves 30th Street at 11:35 A.M. and is

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PASSENGER RAIL TO THE IMPERIAL VALLEY

By Brian Yanity

An exciting prospect for new passenger rail in Southern California is an Imperial Valley extension to the Coachella Valley Rail passenger service, currently under development. As currently proposed, the new passenger trains will go from Los Angeles Union station to Fullerton, Riverside, Palm Springs, Indio, and as far east as Coachella. Some trains of the proposed Los Angeles-Coachella Valley service could extend south from Coachella, to Brawley, El Centro and Calexico. Other possible stops along the line could include Mecca, Niland, Calipatria, Imperial and Heber. Imperial County has a fast-growing population of 180,000, and the combined population of the bi-national region of Imperial County/Mexicali Municipality is over one million people.

The Imperial Valley has long had some of the highest poverty and unemployment rates in California, but the region has great economic potential that would be supported by investment in railroad infrastructure. The region's economy has traditionally been based on agriculture and international trade, but is also emerging as a hub of the growing clean energy industries. Imperial County is already a center of renewable energy production in the U.S., with geothermal, solar and wind power generation capacity totaling thousands of megawatts, and thousands more in various stages of development. A Salton Sea lithium mining boom may be also on the horizon.

In 2021, the Calexico West Port of Entry saw about 6 million passengers in northbound personal vehicles, and over 2 million northbound pedestrian crossings. By both measures, it is the fourth-busiest land border crossing into the United States. This works out to an average of over 21,000 people per day, well over 5,000 of which are pedestrians. Travelers from all parts of Mexico (and beyond) take buses and airplanes to/from Mexicali, and walk across the border to connect to intercity buses originating in Calexico. Mexicali International Airport saw over one million passengers in 2021. The border crossing is in downtown

Calexico, adjacent to the railroad border crossing and walking distance from the potential/historic rail passenger depot site. While Calexico and other Imperial Valley communities are served by Greyhound Lines and other private intercity bus and shuttle operators, public intercity transportation options are limited. Imperial Valley Transit provides local bus service between Imperial County cities and to Yuma. The county's only regularly scheduled airline service is four round trip flights per day from Imperial County Airport to Los Angeles, subsidized by the Essential Air Service program. These Southern Airways Express flights are on 9-passenger Cessna Caravans. While one way airline tickets on this route are advertised as low as \$60, there are at most 36 passenger seats available each way daily, or less than an average bus. Passenger rail service would provide a valuable new intercity transportation option and international connection opportunity, providing congestion relief, economic and environmental benefits to Imperial County by shifting traffic from road to rail.

The first trains came to what is now Imperial County with the completion of the Southern Pacific's Sunset Route between Yuma and the Coachella Valley in 1877. The "Inter-California Railway" line, constructed by the Southern Pacific between 1902 and 1911, branched from the Sunset Route at Niland, going south through the newly-created towns of the Imperial Valley and crossing the border at Calexico/Mexicali. Upon entering Baja California, the track went eastward for about 50 miles to cross back into the U.S. at Los Algodones. From there it rejoined the Sunset Route at Araz Junction, about 5 miles west of Yuma. The mostly Mexican section of track between Mexicali and Araz Junction was abandoned in the late 1950s. Union Pacific's Calexico Subdivision, running 41 miles between Niland and Calexico, is the remaining part of the "Inter-Cal".

The Rock Island and Southern Pacific's joint *Imperial* passenger train connected the Imperial Valley to Los Angeles, San Diego, Kansas City and Chicago between 1932 and 1967. The *Imperial* was a unique trans-continental that diverted from the Sunset Route mainline at Yuma into Mexico, making

stops at Los Algodones and Mexicali, and then crossed back into the U.S. at Calexico. From there, the train split into the Los Angeles Section (stopping in El Centro, Brawley, Niland, Indio and Palm Springs), and the San Diego Section which took the San Diego & Arizona Eastern from El Centro back into Mexico. This service had its roots in a local train between San Diego and Yuma, and made stops in Tecate and Tijuana before crossing back into the U.S. at San Ysidro to terminate at San Diego's Santa Fe Depot. A section of sleeper cars on the famed *Golden State* also used this route to San Diego, which split from the main train at Yuma.

A little more than two decades after the last passenger train stopped in the Imperial Valley, there was renewed interest in passenger rail in the region. Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC)'s 1991 *Los Angeles - Coachella Valley - Imperial County Intercity Rail Feasibility Study* proposed one round trip per day between Los Angeles and Calexico along what was then the Southern Pacific Railroad's Yuma Subdivision (part of the Sunset Route mainline) and Calexico Subdivision branch line.

The 1991 RCTC study proposed new stations at the same sites as demolished historic Southern Pacific depots in El Centro (between Main Street and Commercial Ave.) and Brawley (Main Street). [The Brawley depot was demolished relatively recently, in 2015]. Three site alternatives for stations in downtown Calexico were examined, including two within a few blocks' walking distance of the border port of entry (and roughly the site of yet another demolished historic Southern Pacific depot). Most of the anticipated demand for passenger rail service was expected, as it would be today, to be people crossing the border to and from Mexicali on foot. Thus, it would be desirable to locate a station as close to the international border as possible. The 1991 study also described track and grade crossing improvements needed along the 41-mile Calexico Subdivision between Niland and Calexico (then owned by the Southern Pacific Railroad).

RCTC's current Coachella Valley-San Gorgonio Pass Rail Corridor Service Project

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PASSENGER RAIL TO THE IMPERIAL VALLEY

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environmental and design studies cover a corridor as far east as Coachella. RCTC certified the final Tier 1 program-level environmental impact statement (EIS)/environmental impact report (EIR) on July 13, 2022. With Federal rail infrastructure grant funding available, it is now timely to re-investigate passenger rail service extending past Coachella to Calexico. A new rail study is needed to determine costs, passenger demand, service plan, and capital projects needed to support passenger operations on the Calexico Subdivision, while also providing sufficient capacity for Union Pacific freight service. Railroad equipment technology (locomotive-pulled trains or 'multiple unit' trains) and sources of power (diesel, electric, others) are fast-evolving. A cost-benefit analysis of the Imperial Valley service options is needed to determine the train equipment configuration.

Track owner Union Pacific would surely demand public investment in track capacity and other Infrastructure before allowing passenger trains on the Calexico Subdivision. Upgrades and refurbishment of existing tracks, and adding new sidings and possibly double track in sections, would improve freight rail service as well.

The Calexico East Port of Entry is where all truck traffic entering the United

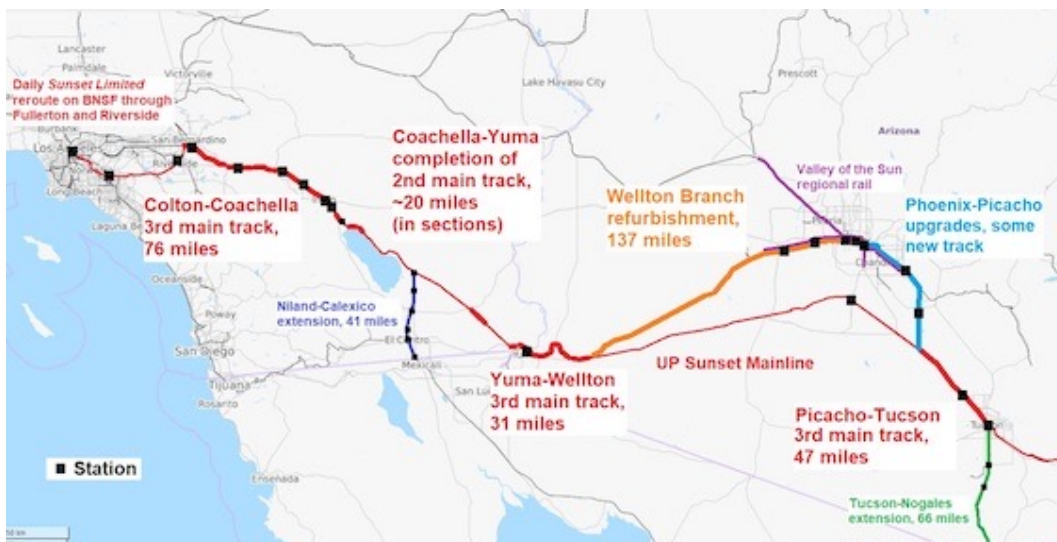
States from Mexicali is inspected. In 2021, Calexico East saw over 400,000 trucks cross into the U.S. (or more than 1,000 per day), making it the nation's 8th busiest land port of entry for trucks. Mexicali is a major manufacturing center, with most of the goods produced exported to the U.S. though the Imperial Valley. With track infrastructure improvements, much of this freight could be shifted from truck to rail, which would greatly reduce truck traffic and pollution. An inland port is now in development between Niland and Calipatria; and UP-delivered containers are already being stored along a loop track at rail-served container storage yard in Calipatria. UP has also been promoting development of the rail-served Imperial Valley Industrial Park on the Northeast side of El Centro. If the Salton Sea geothermal lithium mining industry takes off, sufficient freight rail capacity and reliability will be needed to support the industry. Moving bulk lithium by rail is much safer and more environmentally friendly than shipping it by truck, and should prove more economical.

The Coachella Valley town of Mecca in Riverside County has a population of nearly 9,000 people, and should be investigated as a stop on rail service between Coachella and the Imperial Valley. The town is now benefiting from RCTC's Avenue 66 grade separation project, which opened to traffic in March 2022. Pedestrians and vehicles going to and from Mecca are no longer blocked by trains on the Sunset mainline

at the 4th Street at-grade crossing. The nearest alternative crossing is over two miles away in either direction, so the town had been effectively cut off each time a train goes by or stops. UP trains often stop and hold for many minutes on this part of the mainline.

It is important to see a new passenger rail service to the Imperial Valley as being part of a larger network. The map below shows proposed needed rail infrastructure improvements along the UP Sunset Route (and branch lines) that are supported by the advocacy organizations RailPAC and All Aboard Arizona, including an Niland-Calexico passenger line extension to the Imperial Valley. Amtrak's *Sunset Limited* between LA and New Orleans travels through Imperial County, but with no scheduled stops- the closest being Yuma. A future passenger train station at Niland would serve as a connection point for train passengers changing between the Imperial Valley and interstate trains such as the *Sunset Limited* and future California-Arizona regional services. Imperial County should pursue Federal and state grants for a feasibility study of LA-Calexico passenger rail service. The mobility, economic and environmental benefits of a new passenger train to the Imperial Valley are likely to be huge.

Brian Yanity is a RUN Board member and vice president – south, RailPac.



Proposed rail infrastructure improvements along the UP Sunset Route supported by RailPAC and All Aboard Arizona, including an Niland-Calexico passenger line extension to the Imperial Valley

(background map: OpenStreetMap.org, annotations by author)

