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RUN SPRING CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS ADVOCACY FOR MORE LONG-DISTANCE AMTRAK ROUTES

By David Peter Alan

On Friday, May 17, RUN held an online conference that featured some of the best-known advocates who are promoting restoration of specific long-distance routes to add them to the Amtrak network, as well as a panel featuring longtime railroaders who gave attendees information about what it takes to get a new train (including on a restored route) on the rails. RUN described the theme of the conference as "Expanding Long-Distance Rail Service. Why Amtrak service to more towns and cities is Important to the Entire U.S.!" As a backdrop for the conference, the Amtrak long-distance network now stands at

14 routes; the same size as it was when Amtrak was founded in 1971, although there have been some changes over the years.

RUN Chair Richard Rudolph opened the conference by saying that, since it was founded in 2001, RUN has consistently called for more Amtrak long-distance trains and for all of them to run every day. He said that the primary purpose of the conference is to highlight the work that the advocates are doing to expand the network, but warned: "Nothing is going to happen unless the Feds and the states pony up some money."

The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) is

conducting a study about expanding the Amtrak long-distance network, considering 15 new or restored routes. It named three service expansions as priority projects, with a 15-year planning frontier. They include running the *Sunset Limited* (New Orleans – Los Angeles) and the *Cardinal* (New York – Chicago through West Virginia) every day, which last happened decades ago. The only other suggestion is a restored version of the *North Coast Limited* on the historic Northern Pacific route, south of the *Empire Builder* route in North Dakota and Montana. Amtrak called the train the *North Coast Hiawatha* during
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PROVIDING PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE TO UNSERVED AND UNDERSERVED REGIONS

By Eric Clausen

Unserviced regions cover huge swaths of the country including large areas in most states and have no existing passenger rail service. Underserved regions cover much of the rest of the country and usually have long-distance trains offering service to perhaps two dozen destinations (most of which offer no connecting passenger rail services) on schedules and routes which may also require leaving and/or arriving at undesirable times and which do not permit day trips to visit most of the served destinations. In

contrast, the few well-served regions have sufficient train frequencies and connecting services that it is possible to depart and arrive at desirable travel times and to make day and longer trips to any one of many dozens of different destinations.

It is difficult to predict how much passenger rail service expansion funding beyond what is already in the pipeline will become available. What is easier to predict is most of whatever funding that does become available will be used for public-private partnerships to construct and operate high-speed rail

corridors like the Brightline West corridor and/or to expand and improve already existing passenger rail corridors such as Amtrak's Northeast Corridor. It is also safe to predict that except for where new high-speed rail passenger corridors might be developed, most unserved and underserved regions will see little or no new passenger rail service.

In the United States, the best passenger rail service, at least in terms of frequencies (with a few exceptions), is where Amtrak or some other public agency owns
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MBTA SOON TO RELEASE NEW FARE SYSTEM



An MBTA Orange Line train at North Station, photographed in February 2024. Photo credit: IliketrainsR211T/Wikipedia.

By Dennis Kirkpatrick

The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) is slated to begin release of a new fare collection system sometime in the summer of 2024. The new system, which has been years in the making, and whose development costs have reached close to a billion dollars, will add flexibility to fare payments and move to a fully cashless system.

Currently the transit system uses a plastic “debit card” on which a person can load cash value to use per ride, or a combination pass system taking into consideration the mode of transportation and frequency of usage. A rider adds value at a subway station and each usage debits the ride's cost from the card. When fully implemented, the new fare system would allow tapped fare payments from debit and credit cards or cell phones with “tap to pay” capabilities. This would allow for easier accommodation for the public. New transit cards, known locally as a “Charlie Card” and named after the Kingston Trio song, “Charlie on

the MTA,” are planned to debut in about a year from now.

Under a revised plan of implementation, the new fare system that will serve bus and subway riders will be rolled out in three phases, according to Elizabeth Winters Ronaldson, the MBTA's Acting Deputy Chief of Fare Revenue. Originally, the plan was to release the new system all at once. Under the new schedule, Phase 1 will add the convenience of using a credit, debit, or cellular wallet application to “tap” and pay. Under Phase 2, new Charlie Cards and vending machines to load them would roll out in the spring of 2025. Phase 3 would see the new fare collection system added to the commuter rail and ferry boat systems.

Current Charlie Card users will continue to be able to use their current cards during the changes, with a transition period to new cards expected to take a year to accomplish through 2026.

At present, the bus and subway fare system is not connected to the commuter rail fare system, forcing people to interact with dissimilar forms of payment. The new

system, once fully implemented, will have one system that will serve all.

Happening in parallel to the new fare system will be a new low-income project that will reduce fares to select people on various forms of public assistance such as SNAP (food stamps), MassHealth (state Medicaid), and other low-income situations that can be validated. This process remains under design, having been approved by the state legislature, and will be released for public access later this year.

Elsewhere, repairs and upgrades continue under the direction of Phil Eng, the MBTA's general manager. Faced with a system that had quality and safety problems when coming on board, Eng has brought in his own team and has been diligently making improvements.

The repairs, while welcome, have been a pause for concern among the daily ridership that depends on the service, often facing “slow zones” where full speed operation could be a safety concern. However, repairs and improvements have been consistent, with an estimate of all slow zone areas being eliminated by the end of 2024. Similar efforts are underway on the MBTA's commuter rail lines which are also seeing work being conducted to repair or replace stations and bring Positive Train Control and automatic Train Control (PTC/ATC) on line.

Repairs will often, if not always, result in substitute bus service, or recommendations to use nearby parallel service.

As always, visitors are encouraged to visit www.mbta.com to review current status of all bus, subway, ferry, and commuter rail service lines for the most recent information.

Dennis Kirkpatrick is a RUN Board member. He is retired from the electronics profession having served in consumer, commercial/industrial, and military related projects. He always has his Charlie Card at the ready.

NOTES FROM NEW YORK

By **Andrew Albert**

Omny Update

There is a lot of news on the Omny front: New York's tap & go card, currently in use on New York's subways & buses. While the Metrocard is still in use, Omny usage is growing. More Omny vending machines will be installed in subway stations in 2024, and many are using their smartphones to tap into the subways & buses, after setting up an account linked to a credit or debit card. The MTA will be making a major push to expand Omny in 2024, which will include Student Omny cards, reduced-fare Omny cards, Fair Fare Omny cards, and pre-tax commuter benefit customers, as well. This major expansion is slated to happen by the end of 2024.

And in a major change, Omny will roll out on the commuter railroads—both the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North Railroad—by the end of 2025, a year earlier than originally forecast. That change is due to the fact that Omny will be incorporated into the current

popular Train Time application, which many commuters are currently using. By incorporating Omny into Train Time, railroad commutes will see the program much earlier – and it will not be the current Omny contractor (Cubic) who will be incorporating it, but Masabi, by running their own back-end software into the mix. Cubic would not have had Omny up & running on the commuter rails until 2027 at the earliest, and would have charged the MTA \$772 million. Now, Cubic will refund \$36 million to the MTA, and will not be getting the contract to revamp the commuter rail ticket machines. Scheidt & Bachmann will be getting that contract, and will have it done much sooner!

Train Time, the app that most commuter rail customers are using, has a 4.9 rating in the app stores, unheard of for an app such as this! Incorporating Omny into an already-popular app makes great sense, and will give commuter rail riders the ability to tap for their LIRR or Metro-North ride, continue tapping for their ongoing bus or subway ride, and will be

the only fare payment method one would need. Omny's software will allow for the future possibility of one "clearing house" for fare payment for commuter rails, subways, buses, and other affiliates who may become part of the mix, such as suburban bus companies who currently use Metrocard. Omny is also being used at the JFK Air Train, the Roosevelt Island Tram, and the Hudson Rail Link. Around 70% of those who tap using the Omny system are using their smart devices, with the remaining using either a credit, debit, or Omny card. That will likely change, as more Omny vending machines are installed throughout the system.

Interestingly, Omny is not scheduled to be utilized on the PATH System, even though Cubic is responsible for their turnstiles, as well as New York's. The Port Authority is launching its own system with Cubic for PATH, which doesn't make a great deal of sense, given that many New Yorkers (and New Jerseyans) switch between systems frequently.

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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:

Name	Location	Affiliation
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Please send comments, letters to editor or articles for possible publications to the Rail Users' Network at: RUN; P.O. Box 354, Northampton, MA 01060 or email to rrodolph1022@gmail.com

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FROM NEW MEXICO



Construction on the Alameda Siding. Photo courtesy of Rio Metro.

By **J.W. Madison**

New Mexico Rail Runner (NMRX) Update

Better right of way

Construction of the Alameda Siding, a 1,500-foot passing siding between Alameda Blvd. and Alameda Rd. in far north Albuquerque, is complete (!). Located on a congested stretch of New Mexico Department of Transportation (NMDOT) NMRX track, this new siding is strategically located to improve the on-time performance of Amtrak, BNSF and Rail Runner trains. Additionally, the siding will give dispatchers greater flexibility in creating operating schedules.

This North-of-Albuquerque corridor is used mostly by Amtrak and the NMRX, but another siding, on the segment between Albuquerque and Belen (South of Albuquerque), is in the works (!). This will also serve the BNSF, since the Southern Transcom passes through this area.

Rio Metro is seeking "Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity" (RAISE) Funding for the new NMRX Operations and Maintenance Facility (OMF). They've applied for a \$22.5 million RAISE grant in February 2024 for the construction of the OMF. If successful, this grant would complete the funding needed for this project. Although, given

that RAISE is an extremely competitive program, Rio Metro will continue to pursue other state and federal discretionary grant funds. The first phase of the OMF includes a maintenance building with a high-bay shop and parts storeroom, as well as a service track with a new fueling, sanding, lubrication, waste dumping, and water filling station and will improve working conditions and efficiency, and allow for growth.

The 2024 RUN Conference

As a train advocate from the inland West, I heard a lot at the conference that gladdened my heart. There are several programs underway to re-establish long-dead passenger Rail service in several regions between the Rockies and the Great Plains. For this and more, see the reports of David Peter Alan elsewhere in this issue.

Two Rail goals RAILS Inc has been pushing for many years are:

- 1) **Public ownership** of our national track network
- 2) **The "Rocky Mountain Flyer (RMF),"** which is what we call our fantasy long-distance service following the El Paso-Albuquerque-Denver-Cheyenne-Casper and Points North corridor, terminating perhaps in Shelby MT, with future connections to Calgary, Alberta. (The MT segment should be determined by people better acquainted with that state than I am.)

We also like to call this dream the "Rail I-25." Some of the incremental route proposals and improvements now in the works, or someday in the works, notably in Colorado, might well provide a string of regional routes that could someday be stitched together into an "RMF" or a "Rail Interstate."

More about Point 1:

The Railroad Workers United (RWU) is going after this major and necessary network change (revolution) in a big way. Consult their material at <https://www.railroadworkersunited.org>

NOTE: When I talk passenger Rail with anybody, and especially about the disconnect between the operating models of national Rail vs. that of all our other modes, I'm struck by:

- 1) The number of bright people I meet who think the major tracks (like those of the SW Chief through Albuquerque) are public networks like the Interstate highways, other highways, airports and waterways;
- 2) The outrage and disbelief that follows my explanation of the true ownership of said tracks.

Advocates: You may know that I and RAILS Inc have long maintained that any improvement, however exciting, short of public ownership of our national track network, amounts to a continuation of the passenger Rail trench warfare we've been fighting for decades: A few little gains, more defeats, some stalemates.....people, we're NOT winning this struggle.

The "weapon" that may over time reverse our slow defeat is the wide multitude of Regular People who, once they hear the facts of our transportation infrastructure ownership and the disasters and waste it spawns, will want it changed, and fast.

J.W. Madison is a RUN Board member and president of RAILS Inc, based in Albuquerque, NM.

NEW JERSEY: WHERE'S OUR DEMOCRACY?

By Sally Jane Gellert

Democracy is not doing well in New Jersey, with one exception: we had a recent victory with a successful lawsuit, at least for the Democratic primary, against the "county line," a ballot design unique to 19 of the 21 counties in our state that gives the chosen Party candidate a 35-point advantage. The candidate who brought that suit, Rep. Andy Kim, successfully displaced the Party nominee for Sen. Menéndez's seat, the governor's wife.

OPRA Declawed

However, the anti-democratic forces are strong, and seem to be fighting back. Despite a huge public outcry led by good-government groups including the League of Women Voters, the legislature passed a bill that seriously limits—even "guts"—our Open Public Records Act (OPRA), first established in the 1970s. The excuse was updating OPRA for the 21st century/Internet era and stopping commercial overuse, but in reality the bill makes submitting OPRA requests more difficult, removes the ability of those whose request is denied to have legal fees covered in the case of a successful appeal, and does not limit the commercial "data-mining" uses that were the ostensible reason for the bill. A true update for the Internet era would be to require governments to post more materials on openly-searchable Web sites—that would automatically reduce the number of OPRA requests and effort of municipal officials to fulfill them.

The Lackawanna Coalition was one of many groups speaking out against this bill. Our letter to the governor cautioned him about waiting to sign until after the primary; sure enough, he did so the very next day. We were pleased to see *The Record* run full-page, or almost-full-page, op-eds 2 Sundays running, calling on residents to let legislators know what they thought.

Compensation for County Commissioners

Another bill that they seem to be trying to sneak through without notice is one that relates to a finding by the Office of

the State Comptroller that Union County had violated current law by allowing a substantial amount of compensation outside base salary without the required ordinance and public participation. This bill would make that violation legal; it would exempt from the definition of "compensation" that which is not related to pension determination. Acting State Comptroller Kevin Walsh testified that if they are concerned about de minimus amounts, then they could amend this bill to ensure that such items as speaking fees and tuition are approved by ordinance, but specifically exclude de minimus amounts. To date, that amendment has not been made.

NJ Transit: Anything but Democratic

Turning to NJ Transit, there has long been a major issue of transparency—or lack thereof—in every aspect of the agency. From the public participation in board meetings—in person or by telephone, no video conference capability, to the windows themselves—multilevel cars are notorious for windows that are no better than translucent, if that. The agency has dropped to new depths recently.

SCDRTAC

In January, as reported in this newsletter, NJ Transit's Senior Citizen and Disabled Riders Transportation Advisory Committee (SCDRTAC) celebrated its 40th anniversary, with NJT CEO/president Kevin Corbett encouraging the committee to look toward "not just the statutory requirements, but the spirit of the law" in serving constituents, among the most vulnerable of NJT's riders. This was a welcome exhortation after a long, hard-fought fight to retain its historic purview, and the committee jumped in, connecting with local county officials to ensure that they report their innovations and best practices; looking at legislation that affects senior citizens and disabled residents; discussing how counties can handle dialysis needs; and having regional meetings to build the community's cohesion and share issues specific to each of the 3 regions of the state. Apparently, these actions disturbed the head of the trade

association for the county transportation providers, and in April CEO Corbett responded to his complaint letter by revoking the very agreement that he embraced in January. The committee was ordered to stick exclusively to county programming under the Casino Revenue grant only, cutting back the SCDRTAC purview despite the clear legislative intent expressed in the enabling legislation, calls for annual hearings and a report to the Legislature, specifying: "The report shall cover the status of the program including any recommendations covering the general improvements of mass transit for the senior citizens and the disabled."

In response to Mr. Corbett's communication, SCDRTAC Chairperson David Peter Alan, who led the fight to get NJ Transit management to recognize the history of the committee, on which he has been a member for half of its existence, resigned his office, unable to lead in good conscience a group with such a limited purview. He says, "For more than 40 years, NJ Transit recognized that the Committee's purview covered a broad range of concerns regarding transportation for seniors and riders with disabilities. It included all modes of fixed-route transit, Access Link paratransit for riders with disabilities, and issues generally concerning county-operated services. Now almost all of our historic purview has been revoked, and even our remaining communication with county transportation managers is severely limited. This unprecedented action is, indeed, a sad event; not only for the Committee, but also for its constituents, who are NJ Transit's most-vulnerable riders."

The committee next meets on June 24, on Microsoft Teams.

Congestion Pricing

As this newsletter heads to the printer, it was announced that Gov. Kathy Hochul of New York has "paused indefinitely" plans for congestion pricing in the downtown Manhattan business

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RUN CANADA REPORT, MAY 2024

By Ken Westcar

Increasing Canadian media coverage of passenger rail activity across the country suggests its once “also-ran” role in people’s mobility choices is changing—for the better. Sure, several of our populist provincial (state) governments are fighting hard to keep personal automobile use as cheap and convenient as possible, primarily through escalating public subsidies and questionable new highway projects. Short-haul airlines are beefing up schedules and passenger terminal facilities in a concerted effort to concede nothing to terrestrial transportation modes. Nevertheless, the popularity of passenger trains grows relentlessly.

VIA Rail

VIA Rail Canada reports a 24.7% growth in ridership between 2022 and 2023 with more frequent sell-outs of corridor and long-distance services.

Municipalities between Quebec City and Windsor are clamouring for greater service intensities which VIA would like to provide with the primary constraint being CN’s infrastructure limitations. Transport Canada is studying a report, completed by Ottawa-based CPCS Transcom, on the potential to expand corridor capacity in southwestern Ontario, primarily by removing bottlenecks, but it remains embargoed. CN is reported to be doing its own study. Whether CN and Transport Canada will agree on a mutually beneficial strategy remains to be seen.

VIA’s new Siemens Venture trainsets will be deployed in southwestern Ontario starting this July and are likely to signal existing and potential passengers that the train is here to stay and induce further ridership growth. Amtrak’s proposed Chicago to Toronto daily service is also attracting interest in the region but, sadly, Transport Canada remains largely mum on the subject. The 2024 Canadian federal budget announced early-stage procurement

funding for a new long-distance fleet to replace the geriatric Budd and Alstom equipment used for the “Canadian” and “Ocean” services. Whether new equipment will arrive in time to maintain both long-distance services that are seeing demand growth is of concern. There is no off-the-shelf product so writing a functional specification that includes traditional overnight hospitality, barrier-free access and hardening against the effects of climate change and delays due to freight prioritisation on host railways will consume both bureaucratic time and taxpayer money.

Potential vendors of the new long-distance equipment, preferring to offer more standardised, high-volume products, are likely to quote a substantial premium to meet the desired specification while coping with the vagaries of Canadian federal procurement. Anticipate wide-eyed, jaw-dropping, OMG moments when the bids are opened and a distinct feeling of unease among senior government mandarins.

VIA HFR

Until the proposals from three international consortia are made public there’s little to report. Canadian news media pick up the story from time to time and oversimplify all aspects of this 800-mile-long, near-greenfield project challenged by geography, geology and urban space constraints. Politicians in the province of Quebec want true HSR operating at 200 mph, whereas cooler heads consider 125 mph as optimal, both electrified. The simplistic question is how can VIA’s existing cost recovery ratio of around 50% (in 2022) be turned into a partly private sector enterprise, meeting an acceptable return on capital employed with an up-front investment likely to exceed C\$50bn. If the money doesn’t come from ridership, the taxpayer will be on the hook. Whether land value capture and other non-operational revenues can compensate over the longer term remains to be seen.

Metrolinx

Despite the work-from-home approach to jobs in and around the Greater Toronto/Hamilton area (GTHA), the demand for regional rail services remains robust and growing. In common with many other transit services the focus is shifting from “morning in/evening out” usage pattern to a more diverse, all day one where personal, discretionary travel outside peak times is increasing. Recognising that service intensification induces greater passenger loads, Metrolinx has announced 300 more train departures per week across its GO Transit network and fare integration with Toronto Transit Commission’s bus and light rail network. For a region with some of the most congested and deteriorating public infrastructure in North America, it’s very positive news.

Deutsche Bahn has replaced Alstom as the operator of GO trains on behalf of the Ontario government and is also a major player in GO train service expansion and electrification of core services in the Greater Toronto region. Their involvement in the C\$80bn+ transit expansion in this area (significantly more than the Ontario highways budget) recognises that domestic resources can only play a complementary role in the project and that astute international expertise is critical to its success.

Alberta

In a Canadian province where full-size pickup trucks rule, it is encouraging to hear that the provincial government now recognises that relentless highway construction to cope with a rapidly growing population may not be the best mobility solution. A Calgary-to-Banff passenger rail service, largely on CPKC tracks, has been under consideration for at least five years and suffered the usual onslaught from naysayers, one of whom suggested that a train could collide with moose and bears, So do highway vehicles, my friend.

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RUN SPRING CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS ADVOCACY FOR MORE LONG-DISTANCE AMTRAK ROUTES

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the 1970s, and it was discontinued in 1979. These will not happen soon, as those three "priority" improvements are on a 15-year planning frontier.

Todd Liebman, President of All Aboard Arizona, is involved with the campaign to make the *Sunset Limited* a daily train. His advice was "Know the territory and organize locally; it's about opportunity, mobility, and economy." He called for the restoration of the Wilton Cutoff so the *Sunset* can serve Phoenix again, and also for other capital improvements, and concluded by saying: "The legislature will do what the local politicians want."

Huntington, West Virginia Mayor Steve Williams advocates for a daily *Cardinal*. He touted the train's service to stations in the newly-formed New River Gorge National Park, and mentioned support from the Municipal League in his state and T4America, a national organization. He added that the train "fosters diversification of the economy" in the region, and has asked West Virginia Republicans to support a daily *Cardinal*, too.

The historic NP *North Coast Limited* route seems to be the best candidate to be restored, and David Strohmaier told the conference about his efforts to bring the train back. He was one of very few advocates that the FRA study team had contacted. He is Chair of the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority and a County Commissioner in Missoula, home of the University of Montana. He told the conference: "A local government can team up with Amtrak and make something tangible happen on the ground." Strohmaier advised his audience that "You can't roll up your sleeves while you're wringing your hands" and "Look for opportunities to create additional authorities" like the

one for Big Sky Passenger Rail. He concluded by reminding attendees to make sure that a Service Development Plan (a step in getting a train onto the rails) should include First Mile and Last Mile connections to and from the stations.

While there is little or no reason to believe that all of the routes mentioned in the FRA study will ever host a passenger train again (the agency has a disclaimer about that), some of the routes that were part of the Amtrak system in the early days, and also some that were discontinued before Amtrak started in 1971, have their champions. Some of them presented updates at the conference about their activities.

The *Pioneer*, which ran from 1979 until 1997 on UP between Portland and Salt Lake City in the earlier part of its life, and through Wyoming to Denver after that, is on the FRA list. Mike Christensen, a planner and Executive Director of the Utah Passenger Rail Association, described the efforts to bring it back. He started by saying that Utah is a fast-growing state, and that 75% of the state's residents live in the city and its suburbs; four counties of the 29 in the state, and 33% live in Salt Lake County alone. He also described local initiatives to upgrade the region's existing rail transit and extend service further, to Cedar City and Moab, south of the capital region, and possibly to St. George, toward Las Vegas.

Mississippian Knox Ross, Chair of the Southern Rail Commission (SRC), is known for advocating strongly for the long-hoped-for Gulf Coast Service between New Orleans and Mobile. Along with potential service between New Orleans and the Louisiana capital of Baton Rouge, he is also pushing for a train on the "I-20 Corridor" between Meridian, Mississippi and Dallas. It would run as a part of the *Crescent* between New York and New Orleans as far as Meridian. Ross said that the I-20 train would be "an easy project to sell to conservative members of Congress" and added that Amtrak agreed to push for the train as part of its deal to support

the merger that created CPKC. He also said that the mayors of Ruston, Shreveport, Vicksburg, and Jackson support the project, and that support for it is also growing in East Texas. He gave the SRC credit for garnering much of that support, and said that it was founded in 1982 by an act of Congress.

Ken Buehler, Executive Director of the Lake Superior Railroad Museum in Duluth, presented a case study of efforts to get a shorter route going: the proposed Northern Lights Express between Duluth and Minneapolis. There would be four daily runs in each direction, with five intermediate stops, and taking 2½ hours from end to end. The service would operate with two three-car train sets, plus a spare. He said that the new *Borealis* train between Chicago and St. Paul "was not a coincidence" and went on to mention the benefits of rail service. He said: "Workforce development IS economic development."

RUN Board member J.W. Madison, who is also President of Rails, Inc in New Mexico, described his conception of the *Rocky Mountain Flyer*, a train from El Paso, north through Albuquerque, La Junta, Denver, and Cheyenne, and through Wyoming to Montana. The FRA study also included that route on its own list, going as far as Billings. That city was a stop on the old *North Coast* route, until the train was discontinued in 1979. While Madison has suggested that the proposed *Flyer* should connect with the *Empire Builder* farther north, that could also happen if the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority succeeds in getting the *North Coast* back, and maybe someday going as far as Alberta. He also called for "a publicly-owned pervasive track network" for both passenger and freight trains.

Amtrak ran the *Floridian* between Chicago and Miami until it was discontinued in 1979. It ran through Louisville, Nashville, Birmingham, and farther south to get to Jacksonville on its way to South Florida. The recent

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FRA study also proposed it, serving Chattanooga, Atlanta, and Savannah. RUN Chair Richard Rudolph moderated a panel about segments of that proposed route. The panelists were Director of the Office of Planning at Louisville Mike King, Mayor Tim Kelly of Chattanooga, and Clement Solomon, Division Director for Intermodal at the Georgia Department of Transportation (GaDOT). King said that Louisville is the second-largest city in the nation without a passenger train, exceeded only by Nashville. He mentioned partnering with Indianapolis, and suggested Detroit as another northern destination, in addition to the Chicago – Florida route. He said that “people in Louisville are clamoring for train service” and suggested that it might be necessary to change funding laws to make it easier to raise money for passenger-rail projects. Kelly said that his city is pushing for infrastructure grants, along with Nashville and Savannah through state-level transportation departments in Tennessee and Georgia. Solomon said he was “excited about the study” and glad to see that his department is “venturing into passenger rail.” He mentioned the Atlanta – Savannah segment particularly, as offering “practicality” and additional travel alternatives. A route between Nashville and Atlanta through Chattanooga is one of the proposed routes in Amtrak’s *Connects US* plan to develop new corridor-length routes by 2035, and would comprise a portion of a restored and rerouted *Floridian*.

Some advocates have expressed concern about how long Amtrak will be able to run even its current skeletal national network with equipment that old, as trains have been getting shorter lately. Most of Amtrak’s long-distance cars are old; Superliner and Amfleet II cars are around 40 years of age.

Federico Gozzolo, Amtrak’s Vice-President for Product Development and Customer Analytics, presented Amtrak’s view on the equipment situation. He described a Request for Information (RFI) issued in 2022 and a Request for Proposals (RFP) issued in 2023. The 1,000-page specification document was approved on December 22. Gozzolo said that demand for space on the trains is growing, that Amtrak will be the biggest construction operation in the country next year, and that Amtrak hopes to double current long-distance ridership by 2040. He said that Amtrak expects to have 55 more cars (35 for long-distance routes) in FY24 and 27 (16 for long-distance routes) in FY 25. He also said that the railroad is spending \$28 million to upgrade Superliner cars, and that food offerings will improve.

The last panel of the conference was a “skills and methods” presentation about what is needed to start a new service. RUN Vice-Chair Andrew Albert moderated the panel. He started by mentioning “issues common to all advocacy efforts”: equipment, funding, relations with host railroads, and the political scene along each proposed route.

Josh Coran, a RUN Board member from Seattle who served as Director of Product Development and Compliance at Talgo and stints as Chief Mechanical Officer at the Alaska Railroad and Trinity Rail Express (TRE) in Texas, discussed equipment issues. He mentioned where cars can be found: Amtrak’s Amfleet and Horizon cars, privately-owned heritage equipment, and bi-level or multi-level equipment that regional railroads are now replacing, but added that some of it is in bad condition or very old. He noted that equipment types have to be compatible with each other, as well as with station platforms. He said that Genesis or EMD locomotives can be found, and Stadler is attempting to break into the market in this country. He also cautioned against untried technologies like hydrogen-powered units.

Phil Streby, a RUN Board member who retired from Amtrak and had also been a

railroad officer in the Army Transportation Corps, focused on crews and the time required to train them. He mentioned that new routes will require new crew bases and stations, along with other property, and that crews must be hired, trained, and certified. He noted that Amtrak used host-railroad crews until 1986.

Railroad economist and *Railway Age* Contributing Editor Jim Blaze focused on the economic aspects of getting a new route started. He advised advocates to “take advantage of a negotiating strategy that thinks like railroad executives do.” He said that the outlook for intermodal freight appears flat, and that host railroads need investment; suggesting that potential passenger operators need to pay for capital improvements and suggested using innovative financing like sale-leaseback transactions.

I presented the closing remarks, which are summarized in the following commentary.

A Companion Commentary

There has been no net growth in Amtrak’s long-distance network since it was founded 53 years ago, and trains are shorter today than they were in the past, so there has been a net decrease in capacity. Advocates and their constituents want more trains, but that has not happened; the last train that was added and still runs today was the *Capitol Limited* in 1985. No studies or talk have produced results, and the recent FRA study proposed a planning frontier of 2060; 89 years after Amtrak was founded.

Too many advocates have become excited about grants for infrastructure improvements, but managers, planners, and advocates should not conflate these grants with getting a new train to ride. There is a lot that must happen first, and it always seems to take an extremely long time to go through those steps.

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RUN SPRING CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS ADVOCACY FOR MORE LONG-DISTANCE AMTRAK ROUTES

Continued from page 8

The advocates, planners, and elected officials on the program all did a competent job, as they showed a diversity of styles, along with general agreement about what should be done. Some expressed a level of optimism that appeared to be unfounded. Still, it's not easy to stay enthusiastic for many years without results. The fact remains that everything related to Amtrak, or even to local transit, depends on politics. Nothing happens without political support, and there are probably not many elected officials who ride trains. President Biden commuted between Wilmington, Delaware and Washington, D.C. on Amtrak's Northeast Corridor (NEC) when he was a senator, but it appears that he is one of the few exceptions.

One of the biggest obstacles to an expanded long-distance Amtrak network is lack of equipment. The demand for travel has boomed since last year, but Amtrak is not in a position to take advantage of it. It's not even clear that the existing equipment on today's long-distance trains will last until new equipment can enter service. We don't know if most or all of the existing network will disappear by attrition over the next ten years or so, but it's possible.

The "skills and methods" panel about what must be done to get a train going was an experiment that I suggested. Advocates and officials often argue well for the concept of adding a new route, or more trains to an existing route, but they need to know the fundamentals of what must be done and how much it would cost to do it, in order to convince the decision-makers to go along with their suggestions.

Anyone who advocates for more trains or better rail transit must have extensive knowledge of what is needed and how to get it done. They also need to be prepared to make a number of arguments that would cover many issues of concern, especially when

attempting to convince a group composed almost exclusively of motorists to invest scarce public funds to improve mobility for non-motorists as well as motorists, but which most persons with their own vehicles never use. The key is to make the "business case": that trains bring benefits to the local economy. Democrats and Republicans both want economic benefits for their constituents. That does not mean that the role of trains in supporting a better environment, improving mobility generally, and promoting social equity and justice should be ignored, but not all officials agree with those arguments. If the "numbers" show economic benefits, politicians are more likely to listen to quantitative arguments than to ideas that are not so easily quantified.

There is one factor that seems to separate some advocates from others. Sadly, it almost always seems to give some a chance of success, while precluding others from achieving it, no matter how beneficial or achievable their ideas are. Two advocates who presented at the conference provide a case in point. David Strohmaier of the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority in Montana is advocating for the restoration of the train on the historic Northern Pacific line that was known for most of its history as the *North Coast Limited*, and which Amtrak called the *North Coast Hiawatha* in the 1970s. He is a competent advocate and also an elected official in Missoula County. His organization is a state agency, rather than a group of private citizens who came together to advocate for more trains. The other is J.W. Madison, head of Rails, Inc in New Mexico. He is also a competent advocate, although his style is different from Strohmaier's. He has been a member of the RUN Board for many years, and he helped get the New Mexico Rail Runner started. He has proposed and is advocating for the *Rocky Mountain Flyer*, a train that would fill a large gap in the Amtrak map by running north from El Paso to Montana, through Albuquerque, Denver, and Wyoming. Madison is a private citizen and not an elected official, and his organization has no state support or official standing. Both of their proposed routes were mentioned in the recent FRA study.

That seems to be where the similarity ends. Strohmaier was one of very few advocates contacted by the FRA study, and only a train on the *North Coast* route has the same priority as daily operation of the *Sunset Limited* and the *Cardinal*, Amtrak's two tri-weekly trains. In contrast, the FRA study team did not reach out to Madison or many other advocates, including some who are also elected officials, and none who are active at RUN. As much as the proposed *Rocky Mountain Flyer* would also improve regional mobility in the West, it will be subjected to a 2060 planning frontier, like the other proposals.

All advocates should push for improvements, but there appears to be a severe problem with the process that ignores many worthy ideas and the people who advocate for them (including RUN members), merely because they are not entrenched in politics. Some of the presenters at the conference have political credentials, while others do not. That factor alone does not affect their knowledge or the quality of their advocacy or their recommendations, even though it will probably affect the final results.

All in all, the RUN conference was an "artistic success" and a useful educational experience, especially with the inclusion of material about what must be done to get a train on the rails. Still, the process is long and difficult, and it will be years before Amtrak adds any routes to its long-distance network. At the moment, many of the COVID-inspired cuts in frequency have been restored, while capacity has not. Advocates have their work cut out for them, and there is hope that exchanging information might help.

David Peter Alan is a RUN Board member and a Contributing Editor at Railway Age, where he reported on the conference and commented in greater detail than space allows here. His report and commentary, collectively headlined RUN Conference Calls for More Amtrak L-D, can be found at <https://www.railwayage.com/passenger/intercity/run-conference-calls-for-more-amtrak-l-d/>.

A RIDE ON THE BOREALIS



Photo credit: Jerry Huddleston/Wikipedia

By Clark Johnson

Nona and I took the *Borealis* (train #1333) from Columbus, WI to St. Paul on 22 May—its second day of operation. Overall, I would rate the trip a B+!

The westbound platform in Columbus is being rebuilt, so all boarding is on track 2, the station side. As a result of the eastbound *Empire Builder* (#8) being on time at 1:47 p.m., the *Borealis* was held at Tamarack until it could use the eastbound station platform. We left Columbus at 2:12, some 31 minutes late. We were 22 minutes late at LaCrosse and arrived at 6:54 p.m., 25 down. The return trip the next day was about the same patronage and timeliness.

The consist was P42 locomotive #69 and a cafe-business class car followed by four Horizon coaches. I would guess the patronage when we left Columbus was nearly 150. The new Siemens Venture

coaches used on Hiawatha Service between Chicago and Milwaukee are not permitted on the *Borealis* service as Minnesota is not a member of the Midwest consortium that purchased them. The Horizon cars have been nicely refurbished with new reclining seats and electric outlets at each seat. In my opinion, the Horizon cars have much better seating—so important for a 7-hour trip. The WiFi worked most of the way and the windows were clean.

We stayed overnight at the Hyatt Place, located in the former Customs House and Post Office, and conveniently next door to the St. Paul station. The rate of \$119 (plus taxes) including breakfast for a gorgeous room with 15' ceilings seemed a bargain. The *Borealis* terminates in St. Paul and will not likely ever reach Minneapolis. There is no adequate Minneapolis station—the Great Northern station (now the Federal Reserve bank) was demolished and the

former Milwaukee station, though still extant, is nowhere near any rail line. The commuter trains terminate in the tiny Target Field station in downtown Minneapolis that is not on the *Empire Builder's* route.

The light rail in Minneapolis starts at the Target Field station and terminates at the St. Paul Union station. Trip time is about 50 minutes.

There is persistent talk about a possible Twin Cities to Duluth/Superior train, the Northern Lights Express (NLX). Just how the NLX would connect with the *Borealis* and *Empire Builder* at St. Paul is an issue. The direct ex-Northern Pacific line from St. Paul to Duluth has been largely ripped up; the only functioning line is BNSF's ex-GN line out of Coon Creek Jct., west of Minneapolis.

Clark Johnson is a RUN Board member and member of All Aboard Wisconsin.

PROVIDING PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE TO UNSERVED AND UNDERSERVED REGIONS

Continued from page 1

or has directly or indirectly made major railroad infrastructure investments. The most notable exception is Brightline, which operates on its own railroad infrastructure. Future exceptions will probably include whatever new high-speed rail passenger corridors that new public-private partnerships may develop.

Freight railroads own and maintain almost all of the unserved and underserved region railroad infrastructure. Expanding rail passenger services on freight railroad owned infrastructure is almost always more complicated and expensive than expanding rail passenger service on passenger train operator owned or publicly owned railroad infrastructure. No matter how much grant funding for passenger train service expansion becomes available, passenger train operators which own the needed railroad infrastructure and/or which want to develop new services on publicly owned railroad infrastructure will almost always have a significant advantage.

Passenger train advocates living in the unserved and underserved regions can become so focused on adding just one or a few new long-distance trains that they fail to recognize their real goal should be the development of good rail passenger service, which requires multiple passenger train frequencies and a network of connecting trains which will permit travelers to make day and longer trips to easily reach many dozens of different destinations.

When a region has no service or little service, one new long-distance train may be viewed as a major achievement, but that new long-distance train will only offer the same type of limited travel opportunities that Amtrak's existing long-distance trains now offer. Unserved and underserved regions deserve much better service than the addition of just one or a few new long-

distance trains can provide.

Also, when the vision for expanded passenger train service is only the addition of one or a few new federally funded Amtrak operated long distance trains, many state governments have no incentive, even with the possibility of large federal grants to make the kind of rail infrastructure investments needed to develop passenger train services that a well-served region requires. Without those types of rail infrastructure investments, unserved and underserved regions will continue to be unserved and/or underserved and will never become well-served.

Is there a way to stimulate passenger train service expansion in the unserved and underserved regions where now only freight railroad-owned infrastructure exists? One logical way, is to develop a tax credit plan designed to stimulate freight railroads to operate (or to have another passenger train operator such as Amtrak provide) passenger train service on the freight railroad owned railroad infrastructure. Tax credits have stimulated other industries and if there ever was an industry needing stimulation, it is the passenger train industry.

RUN might take the lead in developing and promoting a tax credit plan designed to open-up the extensive unserved and underserved region freight railroad owned infrastructure for significant passenger train service expansion. The following is an illustration of the type of tax credit program RUN might propose and promote.

Freight railroads could earn tax credits for each 25-mile-long segment of track on which the freight railroad or another operator such as Amtrak provides passenger train service. The tax credit each year would be based on (and limited by) the freight railroad's prorated annual and capital expenditures related to that track segment and a percentage determined by the number of train passengers moving across that track segment and the number of automobiles moving along nearby and paralleling highways. For example, if each day 500 rail

passengers travel on a track segment and 5,000 automobiles travel on nearby highways paralleling that track segment the freight railroad would be entitled to a tax credit equal to 10% of that track segment's qualified expenses. On the other hand, if 5,000 rail passengers travel on that track segment and 5000 automobiles travel on nearby and paralleling highways, the freight railroad would earn a tax credit equal to 100% of that track segment's qualified expenses.

Eric Clausen is a RUN member who has lived in both underserved regions (Minot, ND) and well served regions (Jenkintown, PA) and who was a member of Amtrak's National Customer Advisory Committee (1996-1999).

NEW JERSEY: WHERE'S OUR DEMOCRACY?

Continued from page 5

district. Favored by environmentalists, unpopular with many motorists, and raising some concerns about unintended consequences for surrounding neighborhoods, the plan had been plagued with lawsuits but moving ahead as those suits worked their way through the courts. New Jerseyans who believed that our state, particularly NJ Transit, should have gotten some part of the \$1 billion the plan was expected to raise for the Metropolitan Transit Authority, may be looking for a better deal should the plan be reactivated (after November, perhaps, if Gov. Hochul is making a political calculation similar to Gov. Murphy's regarding OPRA?) We'll be watching.

Sally Jane Gellert, an activist on many issues, is chairperson of the Lackawanna Coalition, an organizational member of RUN, and has been first vice-chairperson of SCDRTAC.

If you would prefer to receive the RUN Newsletter electronically, please let us know by e-mailing rrudolph1022@gmail.com

NOTES FROM NEW YORK

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Rich Davey returning to Boston to run Massport

After two years as President of NYC Transit, which includes New York's subways, buses, and Staten Island Railway, Rich Davey has accepted a job, for which he was one of two finalists, to become CEO of Massport, in his native Boston. Massport runs Boston's Logan Airport, as well as Worcester Regional Airport, Boston's Copley Container Terminal, and the Flynn Cruiseport. He will be earning more than he was at NYC Transit, and gets to return to his home city of Boston.

While President of NYC Transit, Rich emphasized service & reliability here, combatted crime, increased service on many lines (with more to come in July), and emphasized the importance of hearing from customers, with numerous surveys. He also was a big believer in "renewations": structural renewals of stations, platforms, walls, columns, etc. In his two years as NYC Transit President, Rich made a difference in reliability, service, cleanliness, getting booth agents out of the booths and becoming "Customer Service Agents", and the eventual changeover to Omny. Rich will be missed.

MTA Chair Janno Lieber has announced that Demetrius Crichlow, Senior V.P. - Subways, will be "Interim President, NYC Transit." Demetrius has been with the MTA for 27 years, is a New Yorker, and knows the system intimately. Whenever I discover a problem with signage or an announcement, I immediately get in touch with Demetrius, and he addresses the problem. I also get a follow-up as to the resolution of the problem, which I really appreciate. I believe Demetrius will be a great President - even if "interim," and I'm sure he'll be in the running for the permanent position. We all wish Rich success at Massport, and thank him for taking care of our subway & bus riders the past two years.

Ridership Update

Riders are definitely coming back to the subways, buses, and commuter rails, with Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays being the busiest days on the system, along with weekends. Many folks have not returned to offices five days a week, with Mondays & Fridays off for many. However, we have seen some mid-week days with over 4 million subway riders, and the trend continues to be favorable. And-for discretionary travel - on weekends - people are choosing the transit system and commuter rail systems to get to where they want to go. The Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North Railroads have seen very heavy weekend ridership, and now - with beach season here - the Cannonball has returned to the LIRR, as has more frequencies to Long Island's East End, and the Hudson Valley on Metro-North.

Congestion Pricing – Update!

Governor Kathy Hochul has declared an "indefinite postponement" to New York's long-awaited Congestion Pricing program! She stated that New York hadn't fully recovered from the pandemic yet, and to put this burden on New Yorkers (& others) wouldn't be the right thing to do at this time. This puts the MTA's Capital Program in doubt, including many important and long-awaited projects, such as new subway cars, new commuter rail cars, new electric buses, Communications-based-train-control (CBTC) on several subway lines, extension of the 2nd Ave subway up to 125th Street, and making hundreds more subway stations accessible.

Transportation Advocates rallied in Albany after this disastrous news, and the State Legislature was in its last days before recessing for the rest of the year! A proposal to the state budget to give the MTA an "IOU" for \$1 billion was put on the table, but it did not pass, as many legislators didn't feel this was enough, and certainly not a long-term solution for the MTA's massive capital needs.

Many felt the decision to halt congestion pricing was political, with 2024 being an election year. We await the next steps in the saga, and will keep everyone informed on which projects are now on hold, which ones may squeak through, and what the next steps are in this long-running saga.

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

CANADA REPORT MAY 2024

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This route, plus a Calgary-to-Edmonton passenger rail service, are now under the provincial microscope and receiving broad stakeholder input by what has traditionally been a strictly pro-highway government. Many details are yet to be ironed out, including Calgary and Edmonton airport intermodal connections, before detailed planning and pre-construction stages on both routes can commence. Watch this space.

Ken Westcar is a RUN Board member and Secretary, Transport Action Ontario.

Like the newsletter? Care to make it better?

Why not send us an article, so we can possibly include it in the next edition!

Send your article to rrudolph1022@gmail.com, and get published!

RUN Survey Results

Thank you to all of the nearly 40% of RUN members who responded to the questionnaire sent out in January of 2024. The following is a summary of the responses received and the RUN Board of Director's plan of action going forward:

The first survey questions asked whether RUN members have attended annual membership meetings in the past, either in person or virtually, and if they would attend a RUN Annual Membership Meeting in the future, especially if time is set aside for a public comment period. Over 60% of the respondents have attended annual membership meetings and 64% indicated that they would attend a RUN Annual Meeting if time was set aside for a public comment period. In the past, we have held brief annual meetings before our virtual Fall conferences. In the future, the board agenda will include time for public comments.

The fourth survey question asked whether RUN members would attend our virtual Quarterly Board Meetings if the meeting concluded with a public comment period. 53% percent said yes. Board Meetings dates are posted on RUN's website and will now include Zoom log-on info and the agenda for each meeting.

The fifth survey question asked for input regarding the quarterly RUN newsletter. More than one third suggested more images and trip reports, while almost 56% wanted guest columns. The inclusion of trip reports is dependent upon the space available in a given issue. We welcome guest columns. Please let us know the topic about which you plan to write. The Summer issue contains four guest articles written by RUN members.

The sixth survey question asked if we should change the current newsletter format to a magazine format. Only 19% responded affirmatively, 44% said no and 37 % didn't know. (The current format is cost effective even though the newsletters are folded by hand. Mailing costs would be almost twice as much if they were mailed at the magazine rate.)

The final survey question asked about one's willingness to serve on one of the standing committees of the organization. Examples include the conference planning committee, legislative committee or membership committee. Over 80% of our respondents indicated that they are not interested in doing so. However, if you are and have time, please contact us. There's a spot for you!

Get Involved with the work of RUN!

To find out how to volunteer, write to:

RUN, P.O. Box 354, Northampton, MA 01060

or contact Richard Rudolph via e-mail at

RRudolph1022@gmail.com

or visit our new, improved website at: www.railusers.net

RAILPAC STATEMENT TO THE ORANGE COUNTY TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY ON COASTAL RAIL RESILIENCY

Submitted by Brian Yanity

The state-supported Amtrak Pacific Surfliner, which runs on the 'LOSSAN' Corridor between San Diego, Los Angeles and San Luis Obispo, is seeing ridership recover strongly after service was restored between LA and San Diego in late March 2024. The track had been closed for repairs/slope stabilization work since late January due to a landslide on to the track in San Clemente. This was the latest of several periods of track closure since 2021 due to land slips at various locations along the beachside track in San Clemente, which is located about halfway between LA and San Diego. According to the LOSSAN Rail Corridor Agency, during the track closure in February 2024 (which was partially alleviated with three daily bus bridges) there was a 30% drop overall in Pacific Surfliner ridership, which was about 49% of "pre-Covid level". After reopening of the track in San Clemente in March, ridership (measured by passengers per 'train-mile') has already climbed above the spring 2019 level. It should be noted that due to a reduced size of the equipment fleet, there are currently [as of spring 2024] 10 daily LA-San Diego roundtrips, compared to 13 back in late 2019. New equipment being introduced on California state-supported Amtrak services should enable a service level of 13 daily LA-San Diego roundtrips to be restored by FY2025-26.

Submitted by the Rail Passenger Association of California and Nevada (RailPAC) as a public comment for the May 13, 2024 Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) Board of Directors meeting, on agenda item #21, "Coastal Rail Resiliency Study Updates":

The Rail Passenger Association of California (RailPAC) is an all-volunteer nonprofit organization representing the interests of rail passengers in this state

since 1978. So of course we want rail service to continue uninterrupted for passenger trains on the OCTA-owned LOSSAN Rail Corridor through Dana Point and San Clemente.

Per the agreement when OCTA purchased the Surf Line track from the Santa Fe Railway in 1993, it is legally obligated to provide an operable railroad between Orange and San Diego County. These obligations are to the Santa Fe's successor BNSF Railway, Amtrak and the Southern California Regional Rail Authority (Metrolink).

OCTA has a freight obligation with the agency's acquisition of the railroad track. Discontinuance of rail service is not a local decision. Under Federal law,

OCTA as the track owner has the responsibility to manage this key national and regional asset, and needs to consider not just local stakeholders but national and regional stakeholders.

this can only be decided by the Surface Transportation Board in Washington, D.C. It is a national consideration. OCTA as the track owner has the responsibility to manage this key national and regional asset, and needs to consider not just local stakeholders but national and regional stakeholders. The Surf Line plays a key role in the state and national economy, and national defense.

RailPAC appreciates the effort that OCTA and its partners are dedicating to the Coastal Rail Resiliency Study, including identifying the highest-risk "hot spots" along the line. OCTA needs to do whatever is needed to protect the track from landslides, major storms and high seas, in the short term to mid-term.

Ocean sediment and geotechnical matters are not RailPAC's expertise, so we are not qualified to comment on the efficacy of different coastal track protection alternatives, such as rock protection and sand replenishment. What matters is that the vital railroad line is in service, and is safe.

Ultimately, the only permanent solution is to move the rail line off the beach via a new inland alignment- most likely along or beneath I-5. In addition to being obviously good for the rail service, it would also reduce the need for riprap and give the beach a better chance of surviving. And it's in everyone's interest to seek a permanent solution as fast as possible.

SCRRA and OCTA also need to work with Caltrans, Amtrak, BNSF Railway and other stakeholders to start engineering and environmental work on the San Clemente inland bypass, as a permanent solution to the coastal erosion and land slip problems along the LOSSAN track through South Orange County. The good news is that some study work has already been done. The 2003 Caltrans LOSSAN strategic plan and 2009 LOSSAN Program EIR/EIS Record of Decision by the Federal Railroad Administration, previously evaluated inland bypass track relocation options in San Clemente and San Juan Capistrano. Going under I-5 would minimize impacts to the surrounding community by mitigating the complexity of dealing with hundreds of individual landowners instead of just one (Caltrans). Given the vulnerabilities of the existing line through San Clemente, it is critically important that engineering design and environmental studies of the San Clemente bypass alongside or underneath I-5 be resumed.

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

MAINE TRAIN SUMMER UPDATES



By Peter Cole

Maine is the only state that has just one state bordering it. It is also larger than all the other New England states combined. So, while Maine has an excellent train service from Boston which runs through two other states to reach its largest city, Portland, it leaves Maine's next two largest cities in central and northern Maine without service (Lewiston/Auburn and Bangor).

This past year there was a legislative effort to approve a state bill asking for a federal grant to study a Corridor Extension within Maine to serve the second and third largest cities, and the rural areas in between. While winning majority support by the state senate, due to intransigence by the Maine DOT and unintelligible negativity by state House members, the bill was not successful. The good news is that the issue received a lot of good press, and hopefully it will come up again in the 133rd session next year.

In other Maine rail news, the extended seasonal service to Rockland from Brunswick seems to be in a hiatus, despite blessings from the Maine DOT,

and there has not been any public news. The double tracking in Wells continues which should allow additional Downeaster service within Maine.

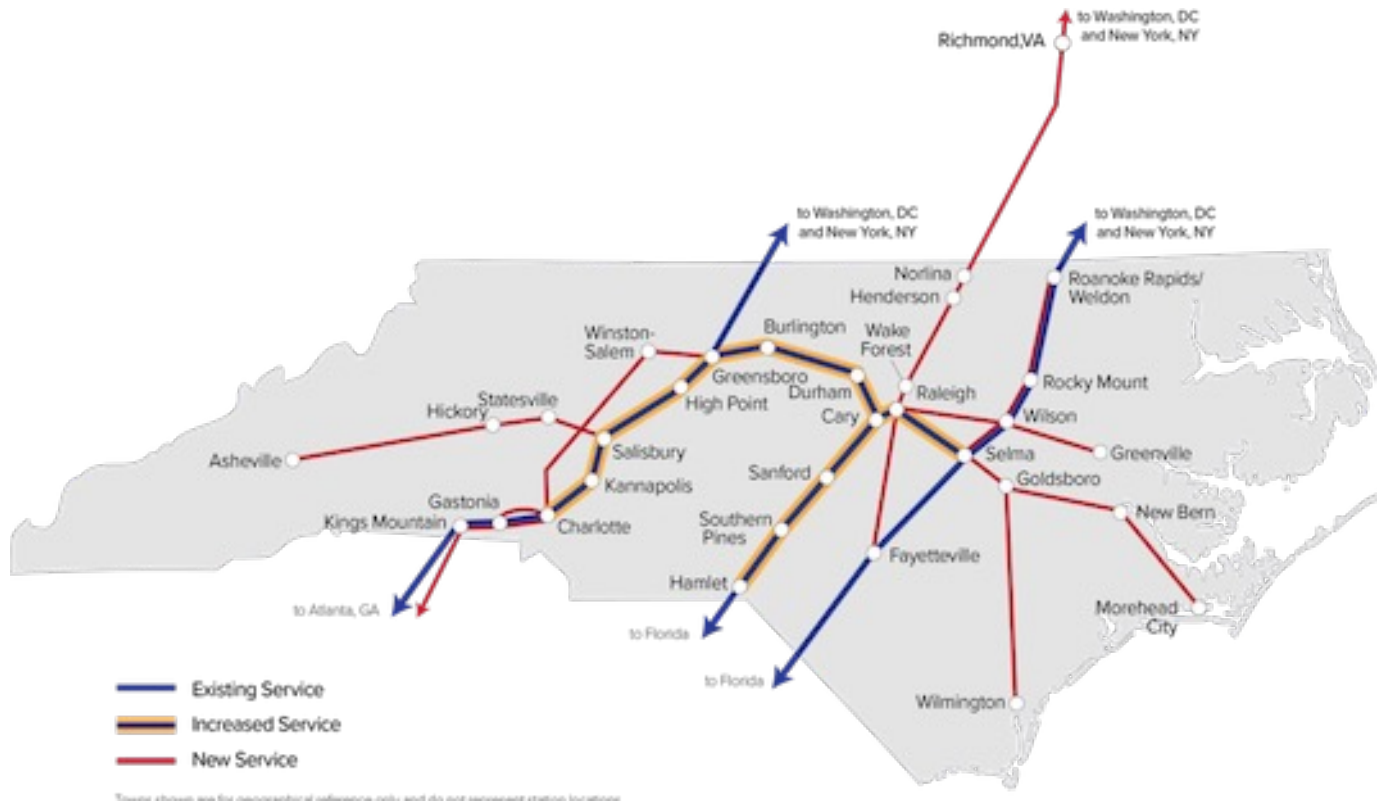
The long-awaited move to open a train station on the main line in Portland might be starting. The tri-state agency in charge of the Downeaster Service, the New England Passenger Rail Authority (NEPRA), has announced that it is

The long-awaited move to open a train station on the main line in Portland might be starting.

looking at three sites. Eliminating the present backing up into the offline station would eliminate 15 minutes from the schedule and speed up passenger ingress and egress in Portland. Of the three proposed sites only the third site is south of the track heading to Westbrook and Gorham, which has been discussed as an alternative to a turnpike extension. The third proposed site also has the best possibilities for downtown Portland transit connections.

While awaiting the new Airo trains for the Downeaster, Amtrak management is eyeing the replacement of the present Amfleet cars with the Horizon Coaches usually used on midwestern commuter routes. The Horizon coaches have a lower passenger capacity, and in addition the train crew cannot open all the doors of the consist automatically (each door must be opened and shut by a conductor). This will be a major problem especially in Boston at the start and end of the run, as well as in Portland where one of the two conductors must be in the cab when the train backs into the station. Rumor has it the Amfleet cars are needed for the Northeast corridor (NEC) due to the higher speed ratings of the Amfleet cars versus the Horizon Coaches. The Downeaster line has a 79-mph maximum speed as opposed to 125 mph on the NEC.

Peter Cole is a member of RUN, Train Riders Northeast, Association of Rail Passengers, Maine Rail Group, High Speed Rail Alliance and Train Riders Association of California (TRAC).



THE ONGOING EFFORT TO RESTORE PASSENGER RAIL TO ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

By **Richard Rudolph, Ph.D.,**
Chairman, Rail Users' Network

A lot is happening in North Carolina regarding passenger rail. The state has received a billion dollars for a high speed rail line from Raleigh to Richmond, the so-called S-Line which is owned by CSX that connects Richmond and Raleigh on the federally-designated Southeast Corridor freight line. It has also been awarded seven FRA I.D. Corridor Identification and Development (CID) grants totaling \$3.5 million. The CID is a "three-phase program" which includes scoping, developing a service development plan, and project preliminary engineering and environmental planning. The \$500,000 grants awarded is for the first phase. Phase 2 requires a 10% state and local match and phase 3 requires a 20% state and local match. Given space limitations and likelihood of success, this column is focused on the possibility of restoring passenger service from Salisbury to Asheville, North Carolina. Although the last passenger train left Asheville on August 8, 1975, there have

been a number of attempts to restore the service over the past several decades. This is not at all surprising, given tourism is a major part of the local economy. Along with national forests, the region contains a large portion of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park as well as several lakes and dams.

Asheville, with a population of 93,776 (2022), is the largest city in western North Carolina and is known for its vibrant arts scene and historic architecture. This city features a "funky and eclectic downtown" with over 30 art galleries, numerous restaurants and craft breweries, a thriving live music scene and hosts the oldest running folk festival each summer. An increase in public support for passenger rail has once again renewed interest in re-establishing service to Asheville.

As early as 1994, the North Carolina Secretary of Transportation directed the state's rail division to determine the feasibility of extending rail passenger service to Asheville. Based on the findings of this study, the North Carolina

Department of Transportation (NCDOT) recommended that the state pursue implementation of rail passenger service between Raleigh and Asheville via Salisbury. The proposed service would follow the route of the existing Piedmont and Carolinian trains between Raleigh and Salisbury. The estimated one-time capital cost for stations, support facilities and track structure totaled \$3,103,985.

A second study, titled the *Western North Carolina Rail Passenger Study - Intrastate Rail Plan*, conducted by the Wake Forest University Babcock Graduate School of Management and completed in January 1997, analyzed five different connections to Asheville from Raleigh, Charlotte, and Greensboro, North Carolina. The preferred alternative, Raleigh-to-Asheville via Salisbury, was determined to serve the largest number of riders and had the greatest potential for future ridership growth and system utilization. This study also pointed out that the service between Salisbury and Asheville,

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THE ONGOING EFFORT TO RESTORE PASSENGER RAIL TO ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

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with a connection to existing passenger services at Salisbury, should be investigated only as an interim step before establishing through service between Raleigh and Asheville.

A third study, conducted by NCDOT in 2000 and designed to update the earlier 1997 study, highlighted the potential benefits of restoring rail service to Western North Carolina. Based on projected ridership, revenue and costs it recommended either daily or four day a week service between Salisbury and Asheville that would connect to/from a New York-bound train as the most cost effective and successful option. The proposed corridor between Salisbury and Asheville consisted of approximately 139 miles of single main track with unsignalized passing sidings. Given that it would take at least several years to complete track improvements and negotiate with Norfolk Southern which owned and operated the line, the study recommended an incremental approach - developing an Amtrak thruway bus service that would provide a temporary transportation connection to Western North Carolina while work began to reestablish passenger train service.

The study also identified several additional phases which would need to be completed before the start up of the new service. It included acquiring property, restoring and / or building new stations and platforms where none currently existed, rehabilitating used rail cars and the purchase of a new locomotive. The grand total, including recruiting / training crews, was \$42,748,655.

The North Carolina General Assembly in 2001 appropriated up to \$250,000 for a follow-up engineering study to determine the necessary infrastructure improvements and costs of those improvements to provide passenger rail

service to Asheville. As a result, NCDOT worked with Norfolk Southern Corporation to select a consulting firm to evaluate the improvements needed for the Salisbury-to-Asheville segment of the line that it owned.

Given that the total estimated costs for the recommended infrastructure improvements totaled over \$134,700,000, it is not at all surprising that the consultants hired did not recommend full implementation of rail passenger service to Asheville at that time. Instead, it recommended that NCDOT should continue to work with communities along the route and the Western North Carolina Rail Corridor Committee (WNRCC) to complete projects that are primarily supported with federal funds and that have broader public benefits. These programs included station restoration, new station development activities and crossing safety improvements.

The WNRCC, which was first formed by the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce in conjunction with other regional leaders in March 2000, has

While there has been a great deal of skepticism over the years about whether train service will ever be restored to Asheville, a lot has happened over the past few years.

played a major role in promoting the restoration of passenger rail service to the foothills and mountains of North Carolina and to provide assistance and support to NCDOT. The committee, which consisted of stakeholders and representatives from communities along the proposed route between Salisbury and Asheville, has encouraged each community to form a local task force to provide support for station restoration projects and they have organized and hosted monthly committee meetings to inform members of the progress and status of the passenger rail initiative.

As a result, some initial station planning

has actually occurred. Several station buildings along the Salisbury-to-Asheville route, including Marion, Morganton, Old Fort, and Statesville have been renovated and are housing other interim compatible uses. In Asheville, Valdese, and Black Mountain, future potential station sites had already been identified in past studies.

Subsequent to the 2002 study, NCDOT worked with a local task force to identify potential station locations. Following that process, NCDOT and Asheville purchased land near Biltmore Village for a potential future passenger rail station.

In 2015, NCDOT's Comprehensive State Rail Plan included a section on the proposed Western NC Service Extension which briefly described the proposed service between Salisbury and Asheville. It would include two daily round trips between Salisbury and Asheville with additional stops along the way. It estimated 24,000 annual ridership in the first year of operation, but pointed out that a revised study should be undertaken to calculate potential ridership, revenue and costs since it was nearly 15 years since the most recent study was completed.

While there has been a great deal of skepticism over the years about whether train service will ever be restored to Asheville, a lot has happened over the past few years. The Asheville-to-Salisbury link was included in Amtrak's Connect US Vision Plan in 2021. This was the first major public demonstration of support for the route. Congress also passed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act which was signed into law by President Biden on November 15, 2021. It allocated \$18 billion explicitly for new passenger lines as part of \$66 billion in new rail investments.

In 2023, NCDOT not only submitted the Asheville-Salisbury route to the FRA Corridor I.D. Corridor Identification and Development Program; it also released a draft of its new 2023 Western North Carolina Passenger Rail Feasibility Study. It identified the conceptual capital and operating costs, and ridership and

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THE ONGOING EFFORT TO RESTORE PASSENGER RAIL TO ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

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revenue associated with initiating a proposed passenger rail service from Salisbury to Asheville over Norfolk Southern's AS-Line for approximately 139 miles. The analysis associated with the study assumed three round trips per day could be provided. In Salisbury, riders could transfer to or from one of five roundtrips provided by the *Piedmont* and *Carolinian* state-supported intercity services and could travel to points beyond such as Washington D.C. or New York City.

The study evaluated two different types of service: a limited stop option which would run directly between Salisbury and Asheville with up to four intermediate stops, and a local option which would include stops at up to six intermediate stations along the corridor.

Predicted travel time ranged from 3 hours and 25 minutes to 3 hours and 48 minutes depending on the number of stops. A significant portion of this travel time would be for traversing the Old Fort Loops, a series of switch-back loops traversing a steep grade on the existing track.

Overall, it would extend service to an additional 1.03 million North Carolinians and provide increased accessibility and mobility for passengers, particularly low-income and elderly riders. The addition of passenger rail service would also benefit the state's growing population of young professionals who prefer living in cities to access restaurants, shopping and other forms of entertainment in downtown areas.

The new study estimates between 350,000 and 550,000 people would ride the train per year between Asheville and Salisbury but there is still the major obstacle - a price tag of \$665 million in

capital spending to establish the line, plus \$7.3 million to 10.9 million in annual maintenance and operating costs. The estimated capital cost includes purchasing three train sets, building a service and maintenance facility, stations, signal and track infrastructure, crossings and signals, and class of track improvements.

Now that the Asheville - Salisbury Line has been accepted into the Federal I.D. Corridor Development Program, Jason Orthner, the director of NCDOT's Rail Division, is hopeful. He believes there will be further opportunities to help pay for planning and construction through the Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail program.

Meanwhile, the French Broad River MPO has asked the NCDOT to consider a potential Asheville station in the River Arts District, in light of the area's economic boom. According to the feasibility study, using that location rather than Biltmore Village would add about \$5 million to the cost of establishing the line. In a yet to be published ridership survey, Asheville has been the most requested location not currently on the NC by Train Amtrak service.

Meanwhile, the Western Carolina Rail Committee, which was reconstituted

In a yet to be published ridership survey, Asheville has been the most requested location not currently on the NC by Train Amtrak service.

as a nonprofit organization in 2017, is actively lining up federal and state leaders to make service from Asheville to Salisbury a reality.

Martin Wheeler, the president of the Carolinas Association for Passenger Trains who is also a member of the WCRC, is also quite optimistic. He believes the Asheville-to-Salisbury service will happen and next in line will be service from Raleigh to Wilmington, NC.

It is way too early to predict whether passenger rail will be restored to Asheville or the other routes in the state that have received FRA I.D. Corridor grants. A new group based in Morganton, called **Waiting for the Train**, is already working to build public support for a Senate Bill 821- the Train Infrastructure Acceleration Act which was filed on May 2. It has passed a first reading in the chamber and has been referred to the Committee on Rules and Operation.

The bill would allocate \$7.5 million for comprehensive engineering, feasibility studies and initial development efforts for all seven routes and require NCDOT to submit an annual report on the implementation of the legislation each year to the Joint Legislative Transportation Oversight Committee and the Fiscal Research Division.

While the money would be in addition to the funds already received for the routes, it remains to be seen what will happen. It would certainly require Republican support, since they are the dominant political party in the state.

Meanwhile, advocates for the Asheville to Salisbury route are already stepping up to raise funds for the second phase of the project which would require an additional \$250,000 to \$300,000 non-federal match. The Land of Sky Regional Planning Council, which is based in Asheville, is helping to organize county government partners to obtain the matching funds for the second and third phase of the Asheville-to-Salisbury passenger rail project.

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CONNECTICUT TRACK WORK SHOULD INCREASE MASSACHUSETTS' "VALLEY FLYER" RIDERSHIP



The Valley Flyer at Springfield, MA. Photo credit: Trains in the Valley.

By Dan Peacock

Between 2018 and the present, trains in the 100-mile, Greenfield, MA – New Haven, CT, Corridor have experienced a dramatic increase in service and ridership.

In June 2018, CTDOT began its highly successful, commuter rail service, and Amtrak expanded its trains along the Springfield – New Haven Corridor, formerly called “Shuttles” but now known as the “Hartford Line” trains.

In August 2019, Amtrak and MassDOT initiated a “Pilot Service,” adding two, 40-mile, roundtrips between Springfield, Holyoke, Northampton, and Greenfield, MA, now called the “Valley Flyer” and made “permanent” in November 2022.

About May 1, I became aware that,

because of Connecticut track work, Amtrak had made major changes in its weekday Valley Flyer service that would span a six-month period: May 28 to Nov 1, 2024. Unexpectedly, these schedule modifications, overall, should save riders money, provide better timing, and increase ridership, as follows:

- Amtrak combined two early morning, southbound, weekday trains (495 and 471) into a single train (425), linked to a NE Regional, Norfolk, VA, bound, 8 car, Train 125. Because of the higher capacity, fares should be lower than for the former two trains.
- Amtrak eliminated a night owl train (478) that got to Greenfield at 12:38 am. Amtrak started a new, northbound Valley Flyer (486), which is timed to receive Train 86 passengers from as far south as Downtown Richmond, VA,

Main Street Station. This train follows the *Vermont* by 68 minutes, arriving in Greenfield at 5:30 pm, providing a second rush hour train to Greenfield and a “Rescue Train” when the *Vermont* is terminated in New Haven because of severe weather or track work.

- Finally, Amtrak turned the previous train southward into Train 479, leaving Greenfield at 6:05 pm, connecting in New Haven with Train 179, and arriving in New York City at 10:57 p.m., the first such evening service there in 60 years!

Local passenger rail advocates hope that promoting these new trains will result in higher ridership and another reason to extend the Valley Flyer to White River Junction, VT, sooner than expected.

Dan Peacock is a RUN member based in Peabody, MA.

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by the Rail Users'
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