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SAVE THE DATE FOR RUN'S VIRTUAL MINI-CONFERENCE, SATURDAY, MAY 15, 2021. 1:00 – 4:45 P.M.

GETTING NEW ENGLAND CONNECTED – HOW RAIL EXPANSION WILL IMPROVE THE REGION'S MOBILITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT!

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

Please join us at the Rail Users' Network's Virtual Mini-Conference, which is taking place on Saturday, May 15 from 1 p.m. to 4:45 pm. This free, exciting event will highlight the ongoing efforts of rail advocates in New England to improve and expand passenger rail service in this five state region.

The program will begin with Richard Rudolph, RUN's Chairman / Maine Rail Group Director, providing a brief update regarding what's happening at Amtrak and Stephen Gardner's response to several issues raised

by RUN's Board of Directors. Andrew Albert, RUN's Vice-Chair and Chair of the NYC Transit Riders Council and Riders' Representative on the MTA Board, will provide a brief update on the impact that COVID 19 is having on rail transit agencies.

The roster of speakers includes:

Karen Christensen, President, The Train Campaign. She will talk about the ongoing campaign to restore passenger rail service on the Housatonic Line, also known as the Berkshire Line, which was the route to the Berkshires from 1842 until 1971. The line carried passengers from Grand Central Terminal through western

Connecticut along the Housatonic River through the Berkshires to Pittsfield, MA.

Tony Donovan, Chairman, Maine Rail Transit Coalition. He will talk about the ongoing effort to restore passenger rail service to Lewiston / Auburn utilizing the state-owned St. Lawrence and Atlantic rail line from a proposed Ocean Gate passenger station in the Old Port area of Portland to Auburn and Lewiston. The plan is to offer transit-style service offering 12 to 20 trips per day over the 31-mile rail corridor utilizing either DMU or EMU equipment.

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NOTES FROM NEW YORK

By Andrew Albert

As usual, there is a lot to report from the New York City area, some good, some not so good. The good news is that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) ended 2020 with some good financials, with fares and tolls coming in higher than anticipated, although severely down due to COVID-19. Overtime expenses were kept lower and federal aid came in thanks to the first COVID relief bill. Borrowing, unfortunately, was necessary to keep everything running smoothly with little or no service cuts. And

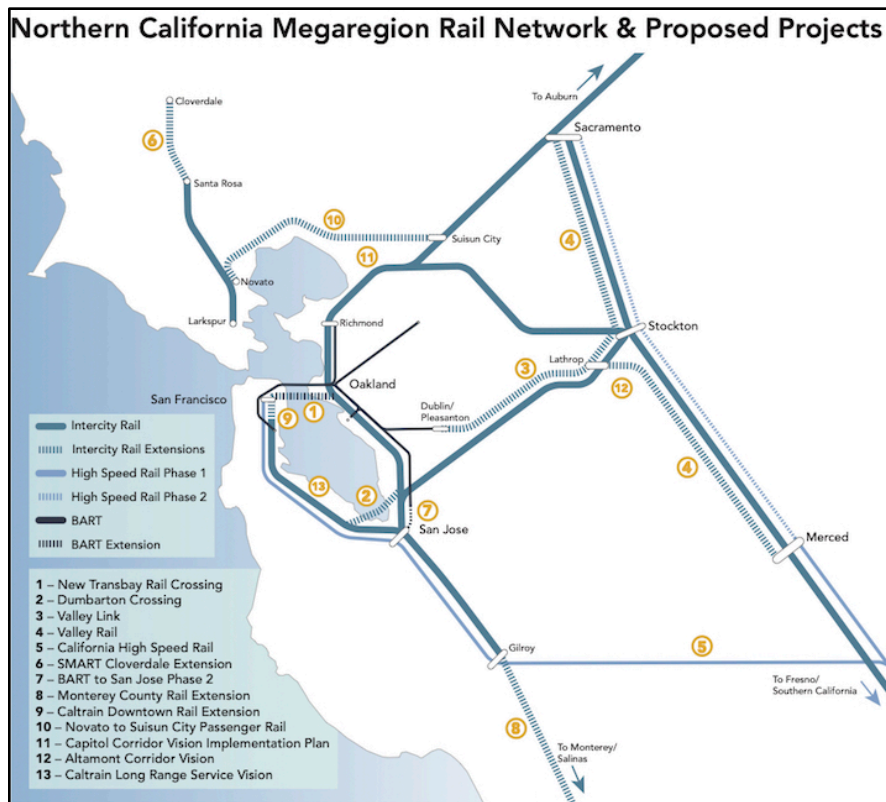
make no mistake - the threatened service cuts that would have taken place early in 2021 were severe: 40% on the subways and buses, and 50% on the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North Railroad. Thankfully, those cuts - which would have killed the New York way of life (walking to a bus or subway station and expecting a train or bus within minutes) and would have driven folks to driving or leaving the New York region altogether - didn't occur.

This region is held together by a unique and expansive system of subways, buses, and commuter

rail systems, the likes of which other cities can only envy. But it takes a lot of money and advocacy to keep the system running, and fortunately we have both. President Biden signed the new COVID relief bill into law on March 11, 2021, which will bring the MTA approximately \$6.5 billion - enough to keep the system running likely through 2023, at a minimum, without service cuts. Unfortunately, the federal aid was NOT enough to stop the Long Island Rail Road from putting into effect a new timetable on Monday, March 8, which cut service on all lines/branches,

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LINK21 OFFERS BOLD VISION FOR DYNAMIC NORTHERN CALIFORNIA PASSENGER RAIL NETWORK



Map courtesy of the Bay Area Council Economic Institute

By Dana Gabbard

On Jan. 27, 2021, Link21 was announced. It is, per the website, "... a long-range transportation program sponsored by the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) and the Capitol Corridor Joint Powers Authority (Capitol Corridor) to transform the passenger rail network serving the 21-county Northern California Megaregion, which includes the greater San Francisco Bay Area, the Monterey Bay area, the Sacramento area, and the Northern San Joaquin Valley."

This map lists the key megaprojects indicating their location by the numbers. They are:

1. New transbay rail crossing. Unlike the original tube, which is exclusively for BART, it is anticipated this will have two sets of tracks, one for BART and the other (electrified standard gauge)

to be shared by Caltrain and the California bullet train. Estimated cost is \$30 billion. Official website: <http://www.bayareaeconomy.org/report/the-case-for-a-second-transbay-transit-crossing/>

2. Dumbarton crossing. Built in 1910, crossing San Francisco Bay on the Southern end, the Dumbarton Rail Bridge has been unused since 1982. A proposal to operate passenger service across it linking Newark in the East Bay and Menlo Park on the Peninsula would involve extensive renovation, in part due to damage the bridge suffered in a 1998 fire. Estimated cost is \$2 billion. Official website: https://www.samtrans.com/Planning/Planning_and_Research/Dumbarton_Rail_Corridor.html

3. Valley Link: A report adopted October 2019 in response to legislation outlined the project as a 42-mile, seven-station passenger rail project

connecting the existing Dublin/Pleasanton BART Station in Alameda County to the approved Altamont Corridor Express (ACE) North Lathrop Station in San Joaquin County utilizing existing transportation rights-of-way where feasible. It is currently undergoing further design and environmental review. The equipment will be self-propelled rail cars also known as diesel multiple units (DMU), possibly hybrid or electric. Estimated cost is \$2.7 billion to \$3.4 billion. Official website: <https://www.valleylinkrail.com/>

4. Valley Rail: Amtrak's *San Joaquins* service plans to implement two new daily round-trips to Sacramento via the Union Pacific Sacramento Subdivision with six new stations. Plus, the aforementioned ACE plans to expand south between Stockton and Merced via the BNSF Stockton Subdivision with five new stations and three shared with the *San Joaquins*, an overall expansion of 119 track miles. Estimated cost is \$1 billion, most of which has already been secured. Official website: https://acerail.com/valley_rail/

5. California High Speed Rail: The 171 mile first segment of the bullet train linking Merced and Bakersfield in the Central Valley is currently under construction. Prospects for the project have brightened after new U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg declared, "I want the U.S. to be leading the world when it comes to access to high-speed rail." Environmental studies continue for extensions to the Bay Area and Los Angeles. Estimated cost of the first segment is about \$20 billion. Official website: <https://hsr.ca.gov/>

6. SMART Cloverdale extension: In 2017, the first segment of Sonoma–Marin Area Rail Transit began operation, a commuter train using DMU equipment. Several extensions have subsequently opened. The next, a three-

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SAVE THE DATE FOR RUN's VIRTUAL MINI-CONFERENCE, SATURDAY, MAY 15, 2021

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Ben Heckscher, Co-founder, Trains In The Valley. Ben will talk about the final Report for the East-West Passenger Rail Study released in January and the MA transportation bond bill signed into law which includes "not less than \$50 million for East-West Rail." He will also provide an update regarding the Valley Flyer Pilot and the effort to turn it into a permanent commuter rail service connecting Greenfield and the cities of Northampton, Holyoke and Springfield, MA.

Peter Cole, Maine Rail Group Director. He will talk about the ongoing effort to restore passenger rail to Central Maine on the state-owned "lower road" from Brunswick to Augusta and beyond, to Waterville and Bangor on what is now Pan Am's railway. As a first step, MRG is seeking \$300,000 from the state's multi-modal fund to pay for a feasibility study which would examine the route,

locations served, as well as ridership potential, related economic development and first approximation of capital operation costs and revenues and proposed sources of funding.

Jay Minkarah, Executive Director, Nashua Regional Planning Commission. He will briefly first talk about the history of rail passenger service from Boston to Concord and then focus on the ongoing effort over the past several decades to restore the service to Nashua, Manchester and possibly to Concord. He will talk about why this route needs to be restored, the obstacles and the current status of the Capitol Corridor project and what he hopes can be accomplished going forward.

Christopher Parker, Executive Director, Vermont Rail Action Network. Christopher will talk about the legislative, policy and advocacy priorities of VRAN going forward regarding the return of Amtrak and how it can be made better and the key infrastructure investments needed to promote future growth. He will also provide an update on the extension of the *Ethan Allen Express*, which runs from New York City

to Rutland and then onto Burlington, VT, which is slated to start up in 2022.

The afternoon session will close with a **public forum** to provide an opportunity for members of the audience to share their ideas and concerns regarding passenger rail / rail transit in North America.

The forum 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 New England.

Please note this is a free event, but registration is required. Be sure to register no later than May 8, so that we can send along the info needed to attend RUN's virtual mini-conference. To register, please go to our website, railusers.net, and click on the "to register" link.

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

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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Please send comments, letters to editor or articles for possible publications to the Rail Users' Network at: RUN; P.O. Box 8015, Portland, ME 04104 or email to rrudolph1022@gmail.com

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A SUGGESTION FOR THE HEALTH OF TRANSIT RIDERS AND THE AGENCIES WHO SERVE THEM

Commentary by David Peter Alan

It has been just over a year since much of the world as we had previously known it closed down in fear of the COVID-19 virus. Restaurants, entertainment venues, museums, and many other places of business or amusement shut down, and only a portion of them are re-opening on a limited basis. Schools everywhere closed, as teachers and kids felt their way around the uncharted world of "on-line" education. Transit has been a casualty, too, as many agencies slashed rail and bus service. So did Amtrak and VIA Rail in Canada. Transit has begun to recover in some places, and the new COVID-19 relief bill which Congress recently passed and President Biden signed will provide \$30.5 billion for transit and \$1.7 billion for Amtrak to help fill in the hole left by declining ridership and revenue.

Even with reduced transit service in many cities, many persons who depend on transit for all of their mobility face an even-greater challenge because of the virus: where they can get their shots, even if they are lucky enough to score an appointment to get their two elusive doses. Americans don't seem to agree on much these days, but there seems to be little dispute that the introduction of the new vaccines has been a mess. Even some seniors, "essential" workers, and persons with underlying health problems (all classes with priority, at least in theory) have not yet gotten an appointment for their first shot. To make matters worse, many vaccination sites are either "drive-through" or otherwise not accessible on transit, so persons who depend on transit are often out of luck. Even in a transit-rich state like New Jersey, few sites are accessible on transit (NJ Transit, in this case) without great difficulty.

President Biden has promised to step up efforts to obtain more doses of the vaccines and to expedite distribution, so

we will eventually get them sooner. Things are improving, as the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is out, but a program like that does not help the roughly 20% of adult Americans who depend on transit, unless establishing transit-accessible sites is a component of the overall initiative.

I made a suggestion toward that objective in February. It first appeared in the "Opinion" section of the *Railway Age* website, www.railwayage.com. It was posted on February 8, and presented the need for transit-accessible vaccination and testing sites as a national need that has to be filled. Two days later, I presented it on the local level to the Board and management at New Jersey Transit (NJT).

The plan is simple, and it should not be expensive. Transit providers could establish testing and vaccination centers at large transit facilities. These places are not heavily-used today, in light of service cuts over the past year. Some facilities have plenty of room for testing and vaccination centers, without inconveniencing the remaining riders. Transit providers are part of the public sector, so it should not be difficult for them to work with State Departments of Health to set up the centers and run them.

Secaucus Junction Station on NJT is a case in point. It is the main transfer point for all rail lines on the Hoboken and Newark Divisions, which means it serves every rail line in North and Central Jersey. It has a normally-uncrowded rotunda and huge corridors that can accommodate everything that a testing and vaccination facility would require. It also has plenty of space that is normally off-limits to the public, which could be used for temporary offices, a testing lab, and freezers to store the doses of vaccine. The facility has some bus bays, too, so NJT could deploy buses to pick people up in nearby communities and bring them to the Secaucus Station for their shots.

Elsewhere in New Jersey, other sites could host vaccination and testing centers, too. They include the Atlantic City Rail Station, Newark Penn Station, and Trenton Station. There may be other venues that would have enough room, as well.

The initiative could also be implemented elsewhere. Both Amtrak and local transit providers have cut rail service lately, so stations are less-crowded than they had been before the virus hit. Some of the stations in the Northeast could host such facilities: Grand Central Terminal in New York, 30th St. Station in Philadelphia, Baltimore Penn Station and Washington, D.C. Union Station among them. Except for Metro-North's hub at Grand Central, the other stations host local transit as well as Amtrak, making them convenient destinations for transit riders. The same also holds true for Chicago Union Station, Los Angeles Union Station, King Street Station in Seattle, and Union Station in Portland.

If a facility is big enough and well-served by local transit, it could be used as a vaccination and testing center. The stations in Denver, Kansas City, and Dallas could work, because of the large local transit presence at all of them. So could major transfer points for local transit, even without Amtrak: Tower City Center in Cleveland and Five Points on MARTA in Atlanta, for example. In Canada, the stations in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver could be used this way, especially in light of the deep service cuts on VIA Rail that have been in effect since the virus hit that country a year ago.

Many persons who depend on transit are among the most-vulnerable in the nation: seniors, persons with disabilities or whose income is low, and persons with underlying health conditions. While transit-dependent persons as a segment of the

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A SUGGESTION FOR THE HEALTH OF TRANSIT RIDERS AND THE AGENCIES WHO SERVE THEM

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population are highly-diversified and represented in every demographic category, seniors, persons with disabilities and persons of color are over-represented in our ranks, compared to their representation in the general population. Clearly, those of us who depend on transit deserve to be protected against the virus as much as motorists do.

Giving transit-dependent persons, and not only motorists, a chance to get the shots is more than just an issue of

health, although the health of millions and some of their lives depend on it. It is also an issue of fairness and equitable treatment. Beyond that, it makes good sense. The more people who are protected, the sooner places will open up again, and the better for the economy and for the persons whose jobs comprise it.

It makes good sense for transit providers, too. It would not cost much to establish vaccination and testing centers at transit facilities, especially if there is enough room to accommodate them. If nothing else, transit providers could enhance their reputations as "good public citizens" by assisting in the effort. Their riders who depend on transit would be grateful to be able to get their shots relatively easily, and such gratitude often results in renewed

loyalty to the transit provider, which means riding more frequently which, in turn, results in more revenue for the agency. In short, everybody wins! This would be a genuine "shot in the arm" for transit providers, as well as for riders who depend on them.

This proposal was originally introduced in an article headlined "A Shot in the Arm for Transit" in the "Opinion" section of the Railway Age website, www.railwayage.com, on February 8.

The author is also promoting it to other advocates and to industry organizations such as the American Public Transportation (APTA) and the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA).

RUN LIAISON COMMITTEE TO FORM

From The RUN Board

Dear Members: In these times of great setbacks and great hopes, we at the Rail Users' Network (RUN) are looking to make fuller use of our resources. This in part means a more active membership, with all the various talents and skills this implies.

As a local rail and transit advocate, you are very likely aware of the many issues across the spectrum that we all face, but have a keen awareness of that issue at the local level.

We are looking to expand our various advocacy efforts. In other words, we are trying to build an ongoing task force that we are planning to call RUN's Liaison Committee.

The Liaison Committee will be made up of willing and qualified RUN Members that would periodically report on what is happening in their region.

This could include an occasional brief report on:

- Active advocacy organization in a particular area.
- Is there a vocal advocate, who has communicated with elected officials and newspapers?
- What is the major issue for a given region?
- What is the press saying and how are they framing it (positive or negative)?
- What is the potential cost of the improvement or extension of service?
- Which elected officials are in favor or opposed to the improvement?
- At what stage is the proposed improvement or extension?

Committee members would also:

- Monitor and keep up (in both directions) with social media.
- Serve as liaisons between RUN and each liaison's local media, which includes keeping up an updated contact list for these transportation journalists.
- Periodically attend a virtual Liaison Committee meeting.

If this appeals to you, you will have an opportunity to use your existing skills (or acquire new ones) in an all-important and under-valued cause.

If interested, please contact Richard Rudolph at: rrudolph1022@gmail.com or through the organization's published postal address in this newsletter.

ABOARD THE RESURRECTED RAIL RUNNER



Note the sign hanging between the two seats. (See below.)



By JW Madison

On March 8, I rode the NM Rail Runner Express (NMRX) from Albuquerque to Santa Fe and back. Our Governor has authorized NMRX to run again, under a much-reduced schedule.

There are no Plexiglas dividers between sets of seats, but the available seats are spaced out as per the illustrations. This way, no passenger faces another. The available seat pairs are limited to one person, unless the second person is a spouse or family member from the same residence. I'm not clear how they check this; everyone I saw on the train sat alone.

Unlike before COVID, security personnel now ride the trains and walk the station stops, not unlike in Texas's DART system, except that the latter personnel are fully commissioned transit cops.

Things are clean and neat onboard. The passenger areas are sprayed and wiped down at the Santa Fe Rail Yard and Belen turnarounds, and at the Downtown Albuquerque stop. No refreshments are allowed except for those plastic water bottles and a spill-proof coffee cup. I'm assuming the latter since nobody challenged mine.

The trains and station stops are 15 years old now, and showing it in small ways. Little dings and scratches here and there, a rattling baggage rack, some paint peeling from the corrugated station stop roofs (some are cement Spanish tile), letters missing from a couple of Rail Runner signs, the kinds of minor defects that add up to shabby and neglected over time. Of course, Rails Inc will be politely calling this to the attention of Rio Metro (the operating agency). Politely, because Rio Metro's been busy with PTC and other "bigger" efforts.

Passengers over 62 years old can still ride for free on Wednesdays, although the regular \$7.00 Albuquerque-Santa Fe round trip fare doesn't exactly break the bank for most people. I asked an employee how they survived almost a year off the job. She said they were "taken care of". Mysterious enough, but good news. I didn't try for any deeper interviews; reduced schedule or not, these folks are busy.

NMRX has risen again, hopefully for good. Come to think of it, the famous road runner-inspired paint scheme on Our Train does look kind of like a Phoenix escaping the flames, doesn't it?

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

BOSTON'S MBTA UPDATES SPRING SCHEDULE; RESULTS A PLUS AND MINUS

By Dennis Kirkpatrick

As more people start to receive a long-awaited vaccine against the COVID-19 pandemic, and more people adjust to returning to the workplace and school environs, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) is reviewing its plans for service across all of its modes of transportation. New schedules taking effect in March of this year will have both good and bad within.

Plans advanced months ago to cease some commuter rail service as early as 9:00 p.m. on weeknights, and no service on weekends, have been set aside for select lines, and trains will operate weeknights until approximately 11:00 p.m. However, the concept of "peak" and "off-peak" trains will be set aside with, in favor of what is being described as a "regional model," with fewer trains spaced more-equally throughout the day. For some travelers, where trains parallel other rail routes or subway lines, it may require taking one mode of transportation for a segment of their commute, then transferring to a second mode for the remainder of the trip on late night, or last-train-of-the-day runs. Select low-ridership commuter lines may still have weekend service cut completely. Details regarding what lines and how this will be accomplished, is yet to be released.

The MBTA light rail transit lines will also see a less-drastic cutback, however service will still be reduced across the board to match the lighter ridership. Bus lines deemed low ridership and slated for elimination remain on the chopping block.

While the MBTA states that service will be restored as more people return to the system, and as pandemic restrictions also get cut back, many regional advocates and the general public remain highly skeptical. So far, only the strong political pressure from state elected officials seem to be a force with respect to this state "transit authority" which operates within and separate from the state's Department of Transportation

The MBTA's Fiscal Advisory Board, installed by Governor Charles Baker (R-

MA) to oversee MBTA expenses some years ago, gets mixed reviews regarding its oversight of these plans, and what should stay and what may go.

Through all of this, the MBTA continues to perform a host of repairs, upgrades, and new service construction since the funds for these come out of a different set of pockets. Among these projects are the build out of the South Coast Rail system as an extension of the Middleboro/Lakeville commuter rail line to New Bedford and Fall River. Work on South Coast Rail is already underway using an existing active freight line. Double-track work on the Franklin Commuter rail branch also continues as does a replacement of a drawbridge in Gloucester on the Rockport commuter line.

On the transit and subway systems various station modifications and track work has been taking advantage of the lower ridership and scheduling work at varying times with shuttle buses replacing regular service. With a few delays due to the pandemic issues and supply chain problems, work on the Green Line transit system extension from Cambridge/Boston to the City of Medford is almost on schedule.

A new fare collection system is also starting a testing phase at various stations and vehicles with a subset of appointed commuters being asked to utilize the new system through the test phase. The new fare system will eventually unify fare collection across all modes of transportation in the MBTA system. At present bus and transit fares are separate from commuter rail fares requiring the maintenance of separate and non-connected fare systems.

On the vehicle side, manufacturing of new subway cars for the Orange and Red Lines from CRRC rail has started to ramp up again. At present, only a handful of test vehicles ply those lines, and as issues arise, they are being addressed at the manufacturing plant located in Springfield, MA. It may be an additional two years before the existing fleet will be completely replaced. Many of the current trains on these two lines are over 40 years old.

For the nostalgic, you may want to make a

pilgrimage to Boston and Cambridge sometime in the next couple of years. The MBTA has been testing a series of hybrid bus vehicles that will operate on both diesel and battery. The long-range plan for these vehicles, if they prove a workable solution, would be to replace the MBTA's Silver Line Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) rolling stock. At present, the Silver Line operates as an electric bus with overhead catenary in the subway and with a diesel generator on the surface portions of its multiple routes. The proposed dual mode vehicles would allow subway operation on battery allowing the elimination of the catenary.

Also in the MBTA's sights is use of these same vehicles on routes now served by electric buses or "trackless trolleys" that serve portions of the City of Cambridge and the adjoining communities of Watertown and Belmont. Since a segment of the trackless trolleys operate in an underground subway tube at Harvard Station (Red Line subway) diesel operation is not allowed, so buses must be on catenary, or with this proposal, a battery. The trackless trolleys could be eliminated completely by the end of 2024, since aside from the brief underground segment, a majority of the routes are on the surface. Of course, environmentalists that have been pushing for more electrification across all modes of MBTA vehicles are not pleased.

As always, those of us who are "Charlies," a popular term for everyday transit users named after the MBTA's current "Charlie Card" fare system, itself named after a popular song written about "Charlie on the MTA," usually have access to web and cellular apps to guide us every day. Travelers to the region are always encouraged to visit, and absorb the data at, www.mbta.com, especially in these times of ever changing schedules.

Dennis Kirkpatrick lives in Boston, MA and is a lifelong public transit user and advocate. For 20 years he was the managing editor of Destination: Freedom, the weekly E-Zine of the National Corridors Initiative. He recently joined the Rail Users' Network board of directors.

AMTRAK ADDS PRIVATE ROOMS ON SOME TRAINS...

By Phil Streby

As reported by Thomas Pallini, **Amtrak is adding nostalgia-inducing private rooms to overnight trains between Boston, New York, and Washington, DC.**

It appears that Amtrak will be following what has been re-discovered in Europe. Overnight train travel in a sleeper is the more civilized way for the business traveler to leave one's city and arrive well-rested at one's destination, having had a good night's sleep and not having to take the "red eye" flight with the associated two-hour check-in-and-wait ordeal. In many instances, the choice of the train is replacing the plane (and having to add a hotel room).

As the headline states, sleeper service has been added to overnight trains between Boston and Washington, D. C. What the headline also suggests is that this

somehow also provides nostalgia for the traveler. Unless that traveler was born before 1970 or watches old movies displaying overnight accommodations, that so-called nostalgia will not be forthcoming, but the additional convenience and comfort will be.

I do applaud Tom Pallini for his suggestion and effort for, hopefully, it was made to induce more travel by train. But, as I've indicated below his name, he appears to have limited knowledge of passenger rail, having worked in and reported for "multiple aspects of the aviation industry."

While he got most of it right, I've made a few changes concerning the room amenities and travel. Thomas is a reporter on the Business News and Transportation desks at Business Insider, covering all things airlines and aviation. Before joining Business Insider, Thomas worked in multiple

aspects of the aviation industry and previously reported on airline news for AirlineGeeks. He studied at Long Island University, Post Campus. The following is his report with minor editing by me:

Mar 8, 2021, 5:52 PM

The overnight trains between Washington, DC, and Boston are getting slightly more bearable with upgrades coming this spring.

Amtrak will offer private rooms on late-night Northeast Regional trains running between Washington and Boston starting in April. The once-daily trains depart in the evening and arrive in the early morning after a nearly-10-hour journey in each direction but have previously been limited to standard coach class and business class seats.

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... AND RESTORES DAILY SERVICE ON 12 LONG-DISTANCE ROUTES

By Phil Streby

Earlier this month, Amtrak announced that it is restoring daily service on 12 of its long-distance (LD) routes beginning May 24 and continuing through June 7. The members of the Rail Users Network can claim some credit for this happening, following a strong letter-writing campaign to members of Congress involved with the Transportation Committee. These letters pointed out the absurdity of the "cost-cutting" tri-weekly lack of service in which Amtrak's own figures showed that long distance trains supplied the company with most of its ticket revenue.

Following that campaign, those members of Congress demanded that Amtrak restore daily service and provide that restoration schedule. Amtrak, in turn, put forth a list of monies required to do so, which further exemplified the continuous lack of funding here in this country. (Oddly, Amtrak's funding requirement

indicated its cost saving to be far below the amount of revenue generated by the LD trains.) Our letters, in addition to calling for restoring daily service, also called for restoring proper dining car service which should NOT be considered a luxury or nostalgic amenity, but **should** be recognized for what it is, a necessity considering the time spent traveling by rail.

We have also called for adding coaches and sleepers during this time of COVID/government-induced separation in order to handle the passenger counts. That equipment could be supplied from the short-haul and state-supported trains once it has come out of overhaul or refurbishment, a program Amtrak has enhanced during this last year or reduced ridership.

Finally, we have called for a massive order of new equipment to supply the needs of future riders. Such purchases should be in

the hundreds, even thousands of new cars and locomotives. Spread over a 10-year program, this country could easily fund the purchase of an estimated (by this author) 10,000 new cars of varying (coach, sleeper, diner, etc.) use and 1000 new locomotives. This purchase would not only allow for about six daily trains on current routes, and a few new routes, but would provide employment for thousands of new factory employees, as well as those of the service industries such as are found around any factory. The Rail Passengers Association based in D.C., has the means by which to calculate the value passenger rail brings to any community, state, or region it serves and can very adequately demonstrate that passenger rail pays much more than it costs.

Phil Streby is a director on the boards of RUN, NARP and the Indiana Passenger Rail Alliance.

NOTES FROM NEW YORK

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to the dismay of commuters, who were left with standing-room only conditions, the fear of catching the virus, and elected officials and advocates wondering how this could possibly happen in the age of Coronavirus.

While it's true that the LIRR did not cut service as severely as Metro-North did when the lockdown began, the March 8 schedule change left lines that had previously had half-hour headways with hourly headways, the West Hempstead branch with two-hour headways, some one-seat rides to Hunterspoint Avenue station changed to a two-seat ride, many runs eliminated, and basically-weekend schedules on weekdays! This includes service every two hours to Speonk, Port Jefferson, etc. And the Port Washington branch - which is largely within the geographic limits of the City of New York (Queens) - with hourly service.

Politicians were quick to demand a return to the previous schedule, with State Senator Todd Kaminsky and Nassau County Executive Laura Curran demanding of the LIRR President, Phil Eng, that the previous schedule must be returned ASAP! Gerry Bringmann, Chair of the LIRR Commuter Council, wondered how social distancing could be possible with standing-room only, and every seat taken on crowded trains? Indeed - if you want people to return to their regular commutes as the pandemic eases, and more people get vaccinated, you want a welcoming, frequent service to greet them - now what took place the morning of March 8th! Well, the powers that be heard the demands, saw the news coverage, and decided the people deserved better and reversed their decision, saying they would reinstate the previous schedule - but not for three weeks!

The pressure is rising, and the LIRR did

reinstate some trains that had been eliminated to ease crowding. There are continuing calls for a speedier return to the old schedule, and there is a chance that might happen. The LIRR is doing a lot of capital improvements, and the reduced schedule was dealing with some of that - but that will now have to be done on weekends or nights, as it was done previously. There is a lot of work scheduled to take place, including more mainline third track installation, new signaling, electrical work, etc. Riders want these improvements - but not at the cost of their health!

In other good news, it appears that congestion pricing will be a go with the new federal administration, reversing the course of the previous administration,

Subways are now running 22 hours a day, up from the 20 hours that was put into place to allow for massive cleaning during the night.

which held the necessary information as to which type of environmental impact statement would be needed hostage for over a year and a half. Once approved, it might be a year before the MTA sees the revenue from congestion pricing, which will fund the \$55-billion capital program, which will fund accessible stations, new signal systems for the subways (CBTC) which will allow more frequent service safely, new rolling stock for the subways, Metro-North, and the Long Island Rail Road, as well as the new Penn Access route for Metro-North into Penn Station.

Another piece of good news is that the subways are now running 22 hours a day, up from the 20 hours that was put into place to allow for massive cleaning during the night. The trains were running anyway, moving employees around the system, and getting trains where they needed to be for the morning commutes. The MTA has learned a great deal during the closures, and plans to clean as much

as possible during the two-hour closure, as well as throughout the day at terminals. Stations are still being cleaned at least once daily, and rolling stock usually twice daily. Experimental new technologies are being tested, and some have the possibility to be breakthroughs in healthy air filtering. It is widely expected that full 24-hour service will return by mid or late summer. New York City is opening up, and a 24/7 transit system is instrumental in that happening!

Another piece of good news is that the OMNY tap-card system is now fully installed at all 472 subway stations, and on all buses, allowing a much quicker, more reliable entry into the transit system, with 55 million taps registered! Later in the year, all ticket types will be available on OMNY, and there will be a MTA-issued OMNY card, as well as continuing the usage of debit, credit, or phone app entry. One advantage of the OMNY card will be fare capping - a system in which you pay for a set number of trips, good for a set period of time, and anything over those trips within the time frame is free. This encourages discretionary travel, and encourages people to use the transit system.

Lastly, the fare hike that was scheduled to take place this Spring has been put on hold. Many MTA Board Members, advocacy groups, and legislators felt that - due to the pandemic, and how people were hurting economically - this was not the time to raise fares. It is not clear when the fare hikes - normally scheduled every other year - will take place. Many are still opposed to raising fares this year, but there is a budget, and more deficits will not help the MTA. It is possible that it could stretch into the fall, but new fare-hike hearings would have to be scheduled. New Yorkers have surely suffered during the COVID crisis, and could use a break. We will see how long that break lasts.

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

SEPTA'S HISTORIC RELUCTANCE TO RETAIN ITS STREET RAILWAY FACILITIES: SYSTEMIC RACISM AT WORK THROUGH THE DECADES

By Chuck Bode

Ever since its creation more than a half century ago, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), which serves the metropolitan Philadelphia region, has answered to a board of directors dominated by suburban Republican politicians and their major financial contributors. The SEPTA Board, as this body is generally known, has throughout its existence pursued the thinly veiled, systemically racist policies of awarding contracts to major industrial corporations and directing capital expenditures to the suburbs. Although the City of Philadelphia tried to resist the massive streetcar-to-bus conversion program of National City Lines, in which General Motors and Firestone Tire each owned an equity interest, by the 1960s only 14 streetcar lines remained, most of them heavily patronized.

Almost from its beginning, SEPTA sought to eliminate streetcar operations, starting with Route 47 in 1969. By the fall of 1977, the lack of commitment to their retention resulted in the conversion of Route 60, for want of adequate funds for track replacement.

By the 1980s, the advocacy community, initially formed two decades earlier to save the country's intercity trains, began to fight for urban rail service. In conjunction with the Delaware Valley Citizens Council for Clean Air, both the Delaware Valley Association of Railroad Passengers and the Citizen Advisory Committee to SEPTA actively urged the retention of the remaining North Philadelphia surface streetcar lines: Routes 6, 15, 23, 50, 53, and 56. Additionally, the Philadelphia Trolley Coalition was formed in the fall of 1992 to oppose the continual downsizing of SEPTA's street railway system and the concurrent loss of investment in Philadelphia's neighborhoods.

Notwithstanding these efforts, today only five streetcar lines operate within Philadelphia and none in North



SEPTA's Route 56, seen here in 1980, was converted to buses in 1992. (Photo: Drew Jacksich/Wikipedia.)

Philadelphia itself. The facilities of Route 15 remain in limbo while the facilities of Routes 23 and 56, the next two most recent lines to be operated with streetcars, continue to be removed, in spite of SEPTA's prior emphatic commitments to their retention. In place of the streetcars, the buses continue to run.

Here in the Philadelphia region, the limited political support for transit remains firmly committed to the suburbs, where work goes on slowly to restore service to Wawa and to build a new branch of the Norristown "High Speed" Line to King of Prussia. Most recently, the idea has surfaced to brand the predominately suburban commuter railroad system as the "Silver Line" and increase its frequency to 15 minutes--better than the frequencies of most City bus routes.

The attitude that buses are good enough for Philadelphia's people of color has most recently come to the fore in a proposal to replace a short segment of historic Germantown Avenue with a minuscule park. Under the justification of mitigating the safety hazards created by bad automobile drivers, transit riders will be diverted away from a neighborhood business district, and still more of the federally funded infrastructure once used by the streetcars will be destroyed.

The Philadelphia Trolley Coalition remains committed to the principal that everyone deserves quality rail service. As shown in the accompanying statement, we continue the fight for a streetcar system that serves all Philadelphia neighborhoods, complementing improved service to the suburbs.

A year ago SEPTA put buses on Route 15, claiming that the streetcars required extensive repairs. Since then, according to reports by insiders, three cars have entered SEPTA's Woodland Heavy Maintenance Facility, but none has thus far emerged. In contrast, the news media have just reported that \$40 million of SEPTA's pandemic relief funds will be used to fund further planning and engineering of the suburban branch line to King of Prussia. Highly paid consultants get to work; the union workers at Woodland get to wait.

Following an entire year of struggle over systemic racism in this country, SEPTA remains clueless. It continues actively pursuing the policy that buses are good enough for Philadelphia's people of color and that they must content themselves with whatever pulls up at the curb.

Chuck Bode is Executive Director of the Philadelphia Trolley Coalition and a RUN Board Member.

Philadelphia Trolley Coalition Statement on the Proposal for the Broad-Germantown-Erie Intersection March 8, 2021 (Revised)

The Philadelphia Trolley Coalition is pleased that the City recognizes the problematic nature of the intersection of Broad Street with Germantown and Erie Avenues. The proposal, however, to close Germantown Avenue between Broad Street and Erie Avenue neither solves the underlying issues nor offers a real improvement to the community. The safest street, carrying the slowest traffic, is proposed for closure rather than the busier streets, carrying the faster traffic.

This proposal is an attempt to apply a feel-good patch in order to avoid committing the actual resources needed by the neighborhood. It effectively discourages access to the neighborhood business district by hindering public transportation. To this end, it inserts several additional turns into SEPTA's Route 23. The removal of Route 23 from a critical segment of Germantown Avenue will, furthermore, signal to investors in the business district—whether current or potential—that the City is no longer committed to the neighborhood's future.

Public policy requires a meaningful commitment from the City to enforcing traffic regulations. The first step toward improving safety is to ensure that these regulations are obeyed. Unfortunately, over the years compliance has deteriorated in Philadelphia to the extent that drastic measures are now necessary. These include the following:

- The installation of red light cameras at the most dangerous intersections, beginning on Broad Street.
- The implementation of VASCAR speed limit enforcement on the most dangerous streets, beginning on Broad Street.
- The restoration of the use of traffic police officers at busy intersections, beginning on Broad Street.
- The installation of traffic-calming devices such as speed bumps, curb bump-outs, and rumble strips.

The second step is to utilize the substantial investments already made in light rail infrastructure on Germantown and Erie Avenues. To this end, we urge the immediate development of plans to institute modern streetcar service on both thoroughfares. This essential step was recommended in the 1989 peer review study of SEPTA's streetcar operations led by Dr. Vukan R. Vuchic, of the University of Pennsylvania. Modern streetcar service will encourage people to patronize the business district while incentivizing them to leave their cars at home.

New streetcars, traffic signal priority for streetcars, and improved facilities for waiting passengers will increase ridership and demonstrate a long term governmental commitment to the community. Rather than the closure of a critical segment of Germantown Avenue and its replacement with a diminutive park, the community deserves from the City permanent investment indicative of such a commitment. The community deserves the timely restoration of streetcar service on Germantown and Erie Avenues.

The third and final step would be a set of aesthetic improvements to the triangular traffic islands. These improvements would serve strictly as a complement to the real investment in a neighborhood to whose future the City should be unequivocally committed.

To Our Members...

Do you have friends or associates that are also interested in a better rail system? There is strength in numbers. The Rail Users' Network (RUN) has established a first-year introductory membership rate of just \$25.00. As we move forward, we hope to expand membership and make our voice louder.

RUN can accept online processing, secured through the facilities of PayPal, as well as a check or money order via postal mail. Adding your email address to your membership will also get you on distribution for additional information on upcoming virtual meetings, invitations to conferences, and receive timely alerts on important legislative issues. Please take a moment to pass this information along to those in your area who may want to be a part of our cause.

Share with them this link: <https://www.railusers.net/our-network-join/> or offer them our postal address: RUN, P.O. Box 8015, Portland, ME. 04104.

If you have not yet sent in your 2021 membership dues, please also consider doing that today.

RUN CANADA REPORT: MARCH 2021

By Ken Westcar

In this article, I'd like to talk about the problems many passenger rail advocates face when trying to ensure that a disparate group of local politicians and business people, who may know little or nothing about inter-community transportation, are asked to advise government on policy. Such is the case with the Southwestern Ontario Task Force that's been struck to advise the Province of Ontario on longer-term transportation needs in the region.

Experience suggests that advocacy groups are not generally given a warm welcome by advisory panels, mainly because their subject matter expertise and opinion often don't align with what the sponsoring government department really wants to hear. As we all know, evidence, facts and politics are seldom affectionate bed-fellows. The problem is compounded when the task force terms of reference are not made public.

However, it's possible to garner some clues from the composition and interests of the panel members. In this case there are several examples of weighting towards the status quo or potentially making the transportation problem worse by addressing symptoms rather than root causes, while ignoring the pressing realities of climate change and more rigorous environmental, social and governance (ESG)-based investment decisions.

So, how do advocates approach this? Will the task force take a pragmatic, forward thinking approach or will they pander to the ideology of a tax-averse government with a penchant for new sprawl-inducing, environmentally harmful multi-lane highways, while struggling with a massive, pandemic-induced provincial budget deficit? Perhaps this is where tenure is useful for advocates who have acquired a "nose" for input that will be hard to ignore and how best to present it.

Factions within advocacy groups can easily disagree. Often there are diverging opinions on how to be relevant and noticed. Would an attractive and high-level 15-slide PowerPoint or a nicely paragraphed 8,000-word, deep-dive text work best? Should the focus be strictly pragmatic or describe, in a politically expedient way, what-good-looks-like even if some hard truths are glossed over? As we all know, in some circles, "truth" is having a tough time of it these days and a focus on the externalities of various modal options could be a yawn inducer for some panel members.

The default for mass intercommunity transportation in Ontario is highways, because they are under mostly provincial control from start to finish. Municipalities have generally followed suit, since alternatives, primarily light and heavy rail, can be challenging, controversial and not always popular with voters with entrenched car dependency. Outside of

the freight and passenger rail industry, there's not a wealth of knowledge on what makes it work, whereas most people know something about highways so they are low-risk for the majority of task force members.

It's perhaps easy to throw in the advocacy towel and let global events and broader public pressure drive needed change. However, advocates are usually thinkers and reject the notion that crises are the only avenues for progress. Being proactive might not win popularity contests, but it can change the narrative for the better. We also accept that, in a metaphorical sense, we need to plant trees under which we may never enjoy the shade. History is replete with such examples.

What will our submission to the SWO Transportation Task Force look like? Whether text, graphic or a combination of the two, it will be honest and very much to the point. It is that poor public transportation and over-reliance on roads exacerbates social inequality and damages regional competitiveness, economic growth and the environment. Hard to argue with that but, then again, we are not politicians with their hand on the public purse strings seeking to win the next election.

Ken Westcar is co-coordinator of InterCityRail.

AMTRAK ADDS PRIVATE ROOMS

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Starting at \$288 for one traveler on the full route, three types of bedrooms will be offered for purchase, including the Viewliner roomette, bedroom, and accessible bedroom.

The roomette offers two seats that convert into a sleeping berth at night. Another bed, stacked vertically, pulls down from the ceiling. Shower facilities,

however, are not located in the roomettes but are shared at the roomette end of the car.

The bedroom is double the size of the roomette and offers a sofa and adjacent armchair for seating and, similar to the roomette, two berths are stacked vertically for sleeping. The room also features a private restroom/shower, and a separate sink with mirror, lights, and power outlets.

A wheelchair accessible option for the bedroom is also available with an in-room sink and restroom/shower.

All cars come with a dedicated attendant (once known as a sleeping car porter) and sleeper ticket holders also have access to Amtrak's lounges in Boston and Washington.

The Metropolitan Lounge, formerly known as Club Acela, is comparable to an airline lounge at an airport with complimentary food, drinks and snacks available for Amtrak's top customers, as Insider found out during a visit to New York's brand-new Moynihan Train Hall at Pennsylvania Station.

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NJ TRANSIT INTRODUCES FLEXPASS AMID BUDGET CONCERNS



NJ Transit rail service, shown here at Trenton Transit Center. Photo courtesy of the Regional Plan Association.

By Sally Jane Gellert

As is the case throughout the country, folks in New Jersey are facing difficulties finding COVID-19 vaccines. A creative solution was proposed at the February New Jersey Transit (NJT) board meeting by *Railway Age* Contributing Editor and Lackawanna Coalition Chairman Emeritus David Peter Alan. Mr. Alan suggested to the board that NJT stations with open space (especially Secaucus Junction station, which was designed for development that never happened) could easily include a vaccination and COVID-19 testing site.

NJT has recently purchased freezers and been certified as a vaccine distributor for its employees, having set up sites in Maplewood and Camden, an important first step as front-line employees are certainly at relatively high risk because of their interaction with the public. However, expanding to qualified members of the general public, especially the transit-dependent, would be a public-relations win for an agency that has struggled with its image. The Lackawanna Coalition, at its February meeting, passed a resolution in support of the suggestion, but the only word from NJT management, via their on-line comment-feedback portal, indicated their willingness to coordinate with Department of Health personnel, but did not seem to want to take any initiative.

The New Jersey legislature has entered budget season; not much will be happening in Trenton for the next couple of months until new budget is due at the end of June 2021. NJT has been relying on CARES Act money even as it continues to run full peak-hour train schedules—yet its own budget report indicates that peak-hour ridership has decreased more than midday and weekend ridership. Other agencies across the country have adjusted to new patterns; we would like to see NJT do likewise. The state budget includes a major increase in contributions to NJT from the Turnpike Authority—from \$129 million to \$350 million—and we wonder whether that is realistic. The good news for riders is that no fare increase is planned.

The other news regarding rail fares on NJT is the new pilot program, FlexPass, which offers riders with the ability to purchase through NJT's mobile app (current version only, available at the Apple App store or Google Play) a pass for 20 one-way adult tickets between one origin and one destination within a 30-day period (bus, rail, and light rail, single mode only—though one may buy a pass for each mode, no more than one per mode at a time) at a 20% discount; the product seems to be designed for those who had been working from home and are beginning to return to the office a few days weekly. If it goes past the pilot stage, the pass will be available

through all payment methods, including cash. Given the limitation of one origin and one destination, as well as the number of tickets, it is definitely more limiting than the traditional monthly pass. It is unclear whether, if one uses the 20 tickets in less than 30 days, one can immediately buy a new FlexPass.

The new NJT board Energy and Sustainability Policy had its initial meeting this month, discussing the update to the Request for Qualifications (RfQ) for the NJTransitgrid project to allow for more renewable energy—the RfQ was first put out in November, this update came out in late February, and submissions are due in April.

We have heard more conversation at NJT board meetings, recently, which is encouraging—for too long, the board has basically been a rubber stamp, with hardly a single No vote, or even questions. However, the board is still not complete, there is still nobody filling the legislatively required “customer advocate” position since the departure of Stewart Mader—not that any employee can truly be an advocate, at best an ombudsman or customer experience officer.

Sally Jane Gellert is chairperson of the Lackawanna Coalition, based in Millburn, NJ.

AMTRAK AND TRANSIT RIDERS, AND “SECRETARY PETE”: WHAT’S IN STORE?

Commentary by David Peter Alan

Pete Buttigieg is now the Secretary of Transportation. Before President Biden nominated him and the Senate confirmed him, he was “Mayor Pete” of South Bend, IN; a formerly-industrial city that had seen better days, as well as better transit. Now that he is “Secretary Pete” and has become the nation’s top transportation official, how will that portend for riders on Amtrak and rail transit?

It’s difficult to determine that at the present time, but we can take some educated guesses, from what we know about his performance in South Bend and what he has said about Amtrak and transit. As a preview, his pronouncements and performance so far do not give riders and their advocates much reason for optimism, but Secretary Pete could surprise us and outperform those cautious expectations.

Buttigieg grew up in South Bend. When he accepted the nomination in December, he mentioned having ridden on Amtrak during his undergrad days. He went to Harvard (Class of 2004), which meant that he took the Massachusetts section of the *Lake Shore Limited*. He did not mention having used Amtrak more recently, but we do know that he had the experience of riding a train, at least for a while. He did not mention transit or Amtrak again, until his confirmation hearing. When Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS) asked him about Amtrak trains running between New Orleans and Mobile along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, Buttigieg expressed strong support for the proposed service. The original question was more about infrastructure improvements than about the level of service, but his answer made at least one “new start” on Amtrak more likely than it had seemed before.

Otherwise, we must look to Buttigieg’s record concerning transit as mayor of

South Bend. He was elected in 2012, and his term recently ended. During his tenure, non-automobile transportation in the city was weak, at best. Amtrak’s *Lake Shore Limited* and *Capitol Limited* stop at a station several miles from downtown South Bend three times a week in each direction, although we now know that the COVID-19 relief bill will pay for a return to daily service, so Amtrak will restore it this summer.

There is also the South Shore Line, run by the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD), a commuter railroad between Chicago and South Bend. Until 1970, the line ran on LaSalle Avenue in downtown South Bend and ran there frequently. From 1970 until 1992, it terminated where Amtrak stops today, and it moved to South Bend Airport in 1992. The South Shore Line runs east of Michigan City to the airport only five times a day, and the first train from Chicago does not arrive until shortly after noon.

Locally there are buses on Transpo, a rudimentary system that does not run after mid-evening on weeknights or late afternoon on Saturdays, and not at all on Sundays. It is an isolated system, with only one line connecting with another transit system: local buses to Elkhart (also an Amtrak stop), sacrilegiously named the “Interurban Trolley.” The current South Bend Amtrak station is a long walk from the nearest bus stop, but there is a line between the downtown terminal and the airport. Despite that line, very few of the trains going to or from Chicago have a good bus connection to downtown South Bend, and many trains have no such connection at all.

That situation did not change during Buttigieg’s tenure as mayor, but there is an ongoing “alternatives study” about whether and where to move the South Shore Line’s terminal. To his credit, Buttigieg supported the option that would return the line to downtown. It

would be more expensive than the others, but it would also benefit the local economy more. The prospective location would be near the now-abandoned Union Station, which could be rehabilitated and host Amtrak trains again. The South Shore Line abandoned its downtown running in 1970, and the station closed the next year.

Buttigieg also earned some “urbanist” credentials with Smart Streets, a “complete streets” policy in the downtown area. The purpose of such a policy is to slow vehicular traffic flow downtown, make the area more aesthetically-appealing, allow some of the curb-to-curb real estate to be converted to non-automobile uses like benches and bike lanes, and create an atmosphere that encourages people to spend time downtown and encourages developers to invest, one building at a time. Motorists hate “complete streets” policies, because less space between curbs is dedicated to automobiles. Local business owners and residents generally like the results, and it looks like that is happening in downtown South Bend.

The post of Secretary of Transportation has been considered a minor one recently, and it has gone to members of the other party or persons who were not thoroughly familiar with transportation issues. Buttigieg brings diversity to the Biden cabinet; he is gay and he is young (39). He also did well in the early primaries last year. In addition, there is nowhere he can go politically in Indiana, which is now a solidly Republican state. More than two-thirds of state legislators belong to the GOP, and so do nine of 11 House Representatives in the state, and Republicans hold all state offices. It does not appear that Buttigieg would have any path to higher office without an appointed position, because even the Congressional district that includes South Bend shows an 11-point Republican registration advantage.

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LINK21 OFFERS BOLD VISION FOR DYNAMIC NORTHERN CALIFORNIA PASSENGER RAIL NETWORK

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mile segment to Windsor, at a cost of \$65 million, is slated to open next year. The northward 22-mile extension between Windsor and Cloverdale (including a station in Healdsburg) is on hold while funding is secured. Estimated cost is \$364 million. Official website: <https://www.sonomamarintrain.org/>

7. BART to San Jose Phase 2: Since its opening in 1972, one of the aspirations for BART was to eventually serve Silicon Valley, which is now in the midst of being fulfilled. Phase 1, a 10-mile extension with stations in Milpitas and Berryessa, opened for operation June 13, 2020. Phase II is a six-mile extension southward to San Jose and Santa Clara with four stations. It is currently in design and engineering. Estimated cost is \$6.9 billion. Official website: <https://www.vta.org/projects/bart-sv>

8. Monterey County Rail Extension: This will be two weekday round-trip passenger train trips from Salinas to San Francisco via the extension of Caltrain. The first phase (known as the kick start project) consisting of Salinas train station improvements, a new train layover facility and Gilroy track improvements is funded and underway. The remaining two phases are on hold pending the identification of funding. Estimated cost for phases 2-3 is \$55-\$75 million. Official website: <https://www.tamcmonterey.org/monte-rey-county-rail-extension>

9. Caltrain downtown rail extension: Since beginning operation in 1863, one drawback of the peninsula commuter rail system currently known as Caltrain is that its northern terminal at 4th and King is at the edge of downtown San

Francisco. Correcting this shortcoming is to be accomplished by extending it via a 1.3-mile tunnel to the underground train station box that was built as part of the recently opened Salesforce Transit Center. Future California High-Speed Rail service which will use the Caltrain right-of-way to reach San Francisco will also use the tunnel. The project is in the early design phase and faces a significant funding gap. Estimated cost (in 2016) is approximately \$3.9 billion. Official website: <https://www.sfcta.org/projects/caltrain-downtown-rail-extension>

10. Novato to Suisun City Passenger Rail: In May 2019 a report was issued on the feasibility of a passenger rail connection between the SMART passenger rail system in Novato and the Capitol Corridor passenger rail system in Suisun City. Estimated cost is \$780 million-\$1.3 billion. Official website: <https://www.sonomamarintrain.org/node/299>

11. Capital Corridor Vision

Implementation Plans: The website states, "The overarching goal is a modern railroad built to international standards, electrified and capable of top speeds of 150 miles per hour." Initial improvements include double tracking between San Jose and Oakland and track improvements between Emeryville and Richmond. Also, realignment from Union Pacific's Niles Subdivision to the Coast Subdivision between Oakland Coliseum and Newark (dubbed South Bay Connect). Later goals include tunneling under Jack London Square, facilitating a direct connection to BART in central Oakland. Estimated cost of the South Bay Connect is \$264 million. The full plan stretched over several decades will cost \$15+ billion. Official websites: <https://southbayconnect.com/index.html>; <https://www.capitolcorridor.org/vision-plan/>

12. Altamont Corridor Vision: The website states, "The vastly improved [ACE] infrastructure would be separated

from freight, with predominately two tracks, mostly grade separated, electrified, to enable fast (up to 125 mph maximum speeds), and frequent services." This includes being compatible with high speed rail, enabling a one-seat ride from the California high speed rail initial operating segment in the San Joaquin Valley. Estimated cost is \$15 billion. Official website: <https://acerail.com/altamont-corridor-vision/>

13. Caltrain Long Range Service Vision:

A program of grade separations, terminal improvements, station improvements, rail Infrastructure/systems improvements and fleet upgrades to fulfill the slogan "Fast Frequent Service. All day, every day." Estimated cost is \$23 billion. Official website: <https://caltrain2040.org/long-range-service-vision/>

Among the megaprojects listed, conspicuous by its absence is a BART extension in San Francisco's Geary Boulevard corridor. The frequently asked question section of the Link21 website states, "No alternatives or alignments have been chosen yet. Link21 will look comprehensively at the full 21-county Northern California Megaregion. This could include studying possibilities to bring BART to the western parts of San Francisco."

One potential revenue source is the proposed \$100 billion Bay Area transportation measure called "FASTER Bay Area," which was poised to go on the November 2020 ballot for the nine Bay Area counties before being put on hold due to the pandemic. It may be put before the voters next year.

The linchpin of the program is #1, the second bay crossing which draws support from leading stakeholders and experts:

"A new transbay crossing is critical to

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WILL PASSENGER RAIL EVER RETURN TO ROCKFORD, IL AND DUBUQUE, IA?



Amtrak's Black Hawk shown near Dubuque, IA in 1981, shortly before service was discontinued.

**By Richard Rudolph, Ph.D., Chairman,
Rail Users' Network
Passenger Rail Journal, 2021- Issue
286.**

This is the 14th in a series of articles highlighting what rail advocates are doing to improve and expand passenger rail service and rail transit in America.

Over the past 40 years, there have been several efforts to restore passenger rail service between Chicago and Dubuque, IA, via Rockford, IL—or at least the 90 miles between Chicago and Rockford, the state's second largest urban area. Until 1971, this route had passenger service. The Chicago/Central Station—Sioux City, IA, night train, the *Hawkeye*, ran until Amtrak began. From 1941 until 1967, the day streamliner *Land O' Corn* ran between Chicago/Central Station and Waterloo, IA. Amtrak and Illinois DOT launched the *Black Hawk* on Valentine's Day between Chicago/Union Station, Rockford, and Dubuque on a schedule close to that of the *Land O' Corn* during most of its life. Amtrak *Black Hawk* service ended on Sept. 30, 1981, soon after the Illinois

state legislature reduced appropriations for passenger rail service.

Advocates kept the issue alive regarding the restoration of service, but it wasn't until the State of Illinois provided additional funding for the existing state-supported Amtrak routes in mid 2006 that the idea began to take off. Senator Dick Durbin held a community meeting in Rockford on July 3, 2006, with Congressman Don Manzullo and Amtrak officials. Given the broad support shown by community representatives for restoring Amtrak service, the Illinois Commissioner of Transportation sent a formal request to Amtrak on August 11, 2006, for a feasibility study regarding possible service between Chicago, Rockford, Galena, and Dubuque.

The Amtrak study completed in June 2007 pointed out that population growth along the eastern portion of the corridor was strong and that highway traffic from Rockford was frequently backed up close to Chicago. Between Rockford and Chicago's

O'Hare Airport, there were many new residential developments. In Rockford, plans were underway to build a convention center downtown near CN. Farther west, Galena was seen as a destination city for tourism, and Dubuque had potential as well. There were plans underway to redevelop downtown property along the Mississippi River. Recent developments included the construction of a river walk, establishment of a large convention center, a floating casino, a hotel complex, and the construction of a Mississippi River National Riverways Aquarium.

The study initially identified four different routes from Chicago to Rockford with the westernmost segment—Canadian National's ex-IC main line between Rockford and Dubuque—being common to all alternatives. The least costly and most direct alternative would be to use Amtrak's trackage from Chicago Union Station south to 21st Street junction, then on CN all the way to Dubuque—the route used by Amtrak's *Black Hawk*. A second route involved leaving north out of CUS onto Metra-owned track—nearly all former Milwaukee Road—to Elgin/Big Timber Road station and then on Union Pacific's line from Elgin to Belvidere and Rockford via Belvidere, Ill., population of some 25,000 people and home to Chrysler's Belvidere Assembly Plant. A third route involved that of the previous route, but remaining on it through to Davis Junction on what was then Chicago, Iowa & Eastern's (now CP Rail) former Milwaukee Road main line to Kansas City. From Davis Junction north 14 or so miles to Rockford, trains would utilize Illinois Railway's ex-Burlington branch to Rockford (thus serving Greater Rockford Airport), and then on CN to Dubuque.

Following the distribution of the feasibility study, a series of meetings were held and an additional route alternative was suggested by

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LINK21 OFFERS BOLD VISION FOR DYNAMIC NORTHERN CALIFORNIA PASSENGER RAIL NETWORK

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building out a highly connected, highly efficient Bay Area and Northern California transportation network. Adding transbay rail capacity will also be instrumental in creating new economic opportunities for more people across the 21-county megaregion." -- Jeff Bellisario, Executive Director of the Bay Area Council Economic Institute [www.bayareaeconomy.org/]

"The San Francisco Bay Area is badly in need of a second transbay rail crossing. The current BART tube is a chokepoint that leads to slower and less reliable transit and precludes round-the-clock service. Furthermore, a second tube could also provide seamless passenger rail opportunities to connect Sacramento to downtown San Francisco, including possibly a future high speed rail connection to link the growing megaregion." -- Ethan Elkind, author of *Railtown* [<https://www.ethanelkind.com/>]

The overall program has also drawn praise and support:

"Inspired by the service levels, extensive network and functionality of Switzerland's public transportation network, California continues its effort to develop an extensive full service transportation network (and it is much more than high-speed rail). This network will be transformative. Not only is this network designed to serve California's transportation needs, it is also designed to allow the full integration of San Joaquin Valley cities with its Coastal cities, foster the development of 'brown fields' (obsolete former city industrial areas) into walkable transit oriented development, and protect California's

productive farmland and scenic vistas from urban sprawl." -- Steve Roberts, President of the Rail Passenger Association of California and Nevada (RailPAC) [<http://www.railpac.org/>]

"LINK 21 holds the potential to be a critical long term project for the future of Northern California." -- Nick Josefowitz, Chief Policy Officer of the San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association [<https://www.spur.org/>].

There is some skepticism. In covering the announcement of Link21 ("Bay Area Wants More Rail"), Roger Rudick, editor of Streetsblog San Francisco [<https://sf.streetsblog.org/>], opined, "It seems unlikely everything envisioned will come to fruition ... but the timing with a huge stimulus package coming from Washington seems propitious."

The Link212 website is <https://link21program.org/en>

Dana Gabbard is a RUN Board member and executive secretary of Southern California Transit Advocates.

AMTRAK AND TRANSIT RIDERS, AND "SECRETARY PETE": WHAT'S IN STORE?

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Secretary Pete does not have prior experience in the transportation field, but neither did any of his recent predecessors. He rode Amtrak in his student days, which is a plus. He improved downtown South Bend with his "Smart Streets" initiative, which also works in his favor. Local transit in that city remained weak and disconnected throughout his time as mayor, which does not bode well for transit riders during his time as Secretary. Neither does his strong emphasis on building infrastructure, since its benefits do not

always trickle down to the riders, and the country may not have the money to build it, or may not be in the mood to spend that much.

All in all, "Secretary Pete" is a mixed bag and, at this time, we don't know whether or not he will take the nation's transportation policy in directions that will benefit Amtrak's riders and those who use transit. He does have one attribute that could make all the difference: he came from a generation that is concerned about our cities and sensitive to environmental issues, rather than the older generation that helped destroy trains and transit, so they could use their automobiles (if they had one) to take them everywhere they went. Maybe his youth will enable him to commit the government to creative ideas that will help solve our transportation problems, especially those that concern Amtrak, transit, and the riders on both. Time will tell but, at the moment, all we can do is hope; as we always continue to do.

David Peter Alan is a RUN Board member and a Contributing Editor at Railway Age. He has traveled extensively on Amtrak and on rail transit in the United States and Canada. He previously served as Chair of the Lackawanna Coalition in New Jersey for 21 years.

For a more-detailed analysis, see a three-part series that he authored, on the Railway Age website, www.railwayage.com, in the "Opinion" section. The series bears the headline: DOTSEC Pete, Amtrak, and Rail Transit: Perfect Together. The articles were posted on January 8, 13, and 19.

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WILL PASSENGER RAIL EVER RETURN TO ROCKFORD, IL AND DUBUQUE, IA?

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Winnebago County officials, who were part of the Northern Illinois Commuter Rail Initiative, which was a committee of area citizens and officials who had led an earlier effort to study Metra commuter rail service between Rockford and the Big Timber Metra station in Elgin. Their new plan involved four different carriers using Amtrak, Metra, and ICE segments to Genoa, IL and from there onto CN via a new connection and then onto Rockford and Dubuque.

The Blackhawk Area Railroad Coalition (BARC), formed in March 2007, supported the CN route from Dubuque, with proposed stops in East Dubuque, Galena, Freeport, Rockford and other communities in Illinois. At the suggestion of *PTJ* editor and Rockford native Mike Schafer, a "suburban" station was added to the list to serve the far east side of Rockford, where most of the city's growth is. Because of higher potential demand, BARC members believed "four trains a day could be offered at higher speeds to bring travel time along the route in line or better than highway speeds and times."

After a period of more community meetings and a web-based public comment period, the Illinois DOT asked Amtrak to work with CN railroad to restore state-supported service when funding became available. The all-CN route had the shortest transit time—nearly two hours from Chicago to Rockford (the *Land O' Corn* schedule for this segment as late as 1966 was 90 minutes including two stops) and about five hours to Dubuque and had the highest annual ridership estimate of 77,500. The annual operating cost to the state was estimated to be about \$5 million per year based on a single daily round-trip frequency.

In 2009, Iowa DOT and I-DOT collaborated on an effort to establish 79 mph passenger rail service between Chicago, Rockford, and Dubuque, and between Chicago and the Quad Cities and possibly west to Iowa City. Iowa Governor, Chet Culver, and Illinois Governor, Pat Quinn, signed "A Memorandum of Understanding" to cooperate and coordinate the planning and implementation of passenger rail service over the two corridors. Each DOT would be responsible for coordinating with owner railroads to plan, finance, and complete track and signal work within their state to implement passenger rail service in the two corridors.

Based on this agreement, they submitted a joint grant application in October 2009 seeking \$140 million in American Recovery & Reinvestment Act funding under the High Speed Intercity Rail Program for the Rockford–Dubuque corridor. The funding requested would have provided funds for environmental impact analyses, track structure improvements, layover facility construction, equipment acquisition and station improvements. Unfortunately, their application was not selected for an award. The two state DOTs, though, continued to work on the corridor using capital funding appropriated by the Illinois legislature.

Iowa's part in the project hit another roadblock in November 2010, after Governor Culver was ousted and Terry Branstad, Governor of Iowa from 1983 to 1998, was reelected. Branstad, as well as the Republican-controlled state legislature, was opposed to spending state tax money to support the rail project to Dubuque as well as the state's share of the \$248 million granted for the Quad Cities–Iowa City passenger rail project which had been awarded funding in 2010. They refused even after the City of Dubuque, the Dubuque County of Supervisors and local governments signed an agreement to develop a plan to cover up to 50% of the subsidy cost for the Chicago–Dubuque service.

Although I-DOT spent two years negotiating with CN to see if its trackage could be used, no agreement was reached. A ray of hope was provided on January 17, 2012, when Governor Pat Quinn announced that the State of Illinois would provide \$3 million for planning a new rail station near downtown Rockford. Nothing else happened though, until the governor announced a \$223 million state capital investment on April 11, 2014 that would create hundreds of jobs and restart Amtrak service in 2015.

A new 87-mile route was chosen between Rockford and Chicago, using Metra's Milwaukee District West Line to Big Timber Road west of downtown Elgin and then on UP's ex-Chicago & Northwestern line, with station stops in Huntley, Belvidere, and Rockford. Right of way improvements and signal upgrades were expected to increase top train speeds from 59 mph to 79 mph, resulting in an end-point to end-point trip time of 90 minutes. The service was to be expanded in the following year to two roundtrips a day, and would eventually continue roughly 93 miles west to Dubuque on CN tracks.

"This funding and a new route," the Governor stated, "are the final pieces of the puzzle to restart this critical rail service, which has been dormant for more than three decades." The Governor went so far as to operate a special train over the UP between Chicago and Belvidere. (The track was too bad west of Belvidere, so the governor had to motorcade to Rockford for his speech there.)

Unfortunately, the plan for the start-up service was delayed soon after Bruce Rauner, the Republican candidate, defeated Pat Quinn in the November 2014 gubernatorial election. In early 2015, he signed an executive order for state agencies to halt non-essential spending, putting set contract activity on hold. Despite this setback, Gerald Podraza, the chair of the Illinois

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WILL PASSENGER RAIL EVER RETURN TO ROCKFORD, IL AND DUBUQUE, IA?

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chapter of Bring Back the *Black Hawk*, and Senator Steve Stadelman, who represents the Rockford area in the Illinois State Legislature, remained optimistic. The group continued to advocate for the return of passenger service, hoping that there would be a change in governorship in Illinois, which would make it possible to move ahead with the project.

Podraza believes *Black Hawk* service could be “a source of extraordinary rural economic development,” and “it wouldn’t just be for business travelers or tourists.” He believes college and university students at Rockford University, Beloit College, and all of the schools in Dubuque “would be favorably inclined to take the train.” Podraza and other members of the group circulated an on-line petition in the summer of 2018 to bring back the *Black Hawk*. Voters in Winnebago and Boone counties, which includes Rockford, approved an advisory question on their Nov. 6, 2018, ballot to reinstate Amtrak Passenger service to northwestern Illinois from Chicago, through Rockford and to East Dubuque.

The election of a Democratic Governor in Illinois, J. B. Pritzker, in November 2018 also raised hope, but it wasn’t until the Illinois Legislature passed and the new Governor signed a \$45 billion infrastructure bill in May 2019 that the project gained new traction. As this bill contained \$275 million to launch rail service to Rockford, I-DOT is finally moving ahead with plans to restore passenger rail service. It has hired WSP USA as project manager and has begun discussions with key stakeholders, including local mayors and state representatives, regarding whether Amtrak or Metra will provide the service from Chicago to Rockford.

I-DOT Passenger Rail’s Communications Manager, Scott Speegle, confirmed that there has been some discussion regarding who will run the service, but no decision has been made. He stated it is being considered as intercity rail service with two frequencies a day.

While neither Rockford nor Belvidere are part of the Regional Transportation Authority that includes Metra, Representative Stadelman believes it makes more sense for Metra to provide frequent regional service than the two daily train frequencies that Amtrak could provide. He remains hopeful that there could be a legislative work-around in case taxpayers are reluctant to pay additional taxes to pay for Metra’s service. He believes I-DOT could directly contract with Metra to provide the service. In the meantime, WSP is working with UP and Metra officials to determine the improvements needed to restore passenger service to Rockford. With the WSP USA agreement in place, preliminary engineering and environmental analysis are among the next steps needed before final design and construction can take place.

I-DOT has also recently announced a \$345,000 grant for a passenger rail feasibility study for returning passenger service between Rockford and Dubuque. The grant is administered by I-DOT using federal funds to advance the objectives of the Illinois Long-Range Transportation plan. The East Central Intergovernmental Planning Association based in Dubuque is assisting with the study, and has issued a RFP for a Passenger Rail Feasibility Study which was due on Dec. 18, 2020. A stakeholder group has also been formed which includes representatives from Dubuque, East Dubuque, Galena, Freeport, rail groups, and planning agencies along with I-DOT. This group is charged with providing input regarding service rationale, route evaluation, environmental findings, ridership and revenue forecasts, along with benefit-cost analysis.

Both I-DOT and Iowa DOT continue to support the return of passenger service from Chicago to Rockford and Dubuque, but it is far too early to know whether this will happen. It is not clear whether Iowa’s governor or the state legislature will provide funds to help restore the service after the proposed feasibility study is completed. Governor Kim Reynolds, who first served as Lieutenant Governor in 2016, became governor after Terry Branstad stepped down to become U.S. Ambassador to China in 2016. She was elected Governor in 2018 and is currently serving out her term. As a result of the 2020 election, Republicans retain trifecta control of Iowa State Government. Across the border in northwestern Illinois, residents remain hopeful that service will be restored at least from Chicago to Rockford, but it remains to be seen whether this will ever happen as well.

AMTRAK ADDS PRIVATE ROOMS

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Washington to Boston service on train 66 departs Union Station at 10 p.m. and arrives in New York at 1:55 a.m. followed by Boston at 7:58 a.m. for a journey time of nine hours and 58 minutes.

Boston to Washington service on train 67 departs South Station at 9:30 p.m. and arrives in New York at 2:30 a.m. followed by Washington at 7 a.m. for a journey time of nine hours and 30 minutes. On Fridays and Saturdays, though, times differ and the service is offered as train 65.

Trains make station stops at numerous intermediary points along the corridor like New Haven, CT; Wilmington, DE; and Trenton, NJ, as well as a 45-minute layover in New York City.

Travelers can book the rooms for any stretch of the journey.

Phil Streby is a director on the boards of RUN, NARP and the Indiana Passenger Rail Alliance.

FROM THE RUN BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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