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## SAVE THE DATE FOR RUN'S FALL VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

*F.R.A. Corridor Grants – Boosting Economic Activity the Rail Way!*

**NOV. 15, 2024 12:30 PM – 5 PM EDT**

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

Please join us at the Rail Users' Network's Fall Virtual Conference, which is taking place on Friday, November 15, 2024, from 12:30 - 5 pm EST. This event which is taking place virtually on Zoom, will highlight a representative sample of I.D Corridors awards granted this past year. Each speaker will have up to 25 minutes to talk about their state's projects, which includes five minutes for Q/A. The list of confirmed speakers includes:

- Carl Fowler, Vermont Rail Advisory Council, will talk about the Vermonter Corridor I.D. Project to establish a second frequency from White River Junction to NYC and to reestablish rail service from St. Albans, VT to Montreal.

- Andy Koziol, East-West Rail Director, will talk about the MassDOT's East-West Rail Project.

- Ray Rapp. Co-chair, Western North Carolina Rail Corridor, will

talk about passenger rail service to Asheville, NC.

- John Esterly, Chairman, Ohio State Legislative Board, will talk about the 3C & D project and the Cleveland, Toledo-Detroit Corridor project.

- John Spain, Louisiana Commissioner, Southern Rail Commission, will talk about the Baton Rouge to New Orleans FRA I. D. Corridor Project.

- Peter LeCody, President, Texas  
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## TRANSIT ACROSS THE NATION FACES A FISCAL CLIFF

**By David Peter Alan**

Transit throughout the nation (and in other nations, too) was in trouble when the COVID-19 virus hit in 2020. Ridership suddenly plummeted, as many city and suburban dwellers were afraid to be around other people, including on trains, buses, and other transit vehicles. Many began working from home; a trend that has not entirely ended, and probably never will. With such sharp decreases in ridership came similar decreases in revenue. Still, many "essential workers" and non-motorists

had to use transit to get to their jobs and other places.

To keep the nation's transit going, Congress enacted three pieces of legislation as part of the COVID-19 relief effort: the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) in 2020, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. Those statutes provided \$69.5 billion for transit, which agencies could use to support operations; a use that was generally not otherwise allowed under federal law for major transit agencies.

The grants authorized under those statutes were implemented on a one-shot basis, and many transit providers are now spending the last of that money, or they have already done so. At the same time, with few exceptions, ridership has not returned to pre-COVID levels, and it is becoming increasingly apparent that ridership and revenue will probably level off at current rates, even though the costs of providing service will continue to increase over time.

In effect, that is the "fiscal cliff" that almost every transit provider  
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# WHY WE, THE MTA BOARD'S RIDER REPRESENTATIVES, SUPPORT THE LAWSUITS AGAINST GOVERNOR HOCHUL'S CONGESTION PRICING PAUSE

*Our MTA system and its riders are worth fighting for*

**By Andrew Albert and Gerald Bringmann**

Since Governor Hochul commenced the congestion pricing pause through a pre-taped announcement on June 5th, we, as representatives of New York City Transit and LIRR riders, have been alarmed by the quick and serious repercussions to the MTA's budget that followed.

Governor Hochul's flippant disregard for years of planning and outreach done by the MTA and the law itself is what prompted us to sign an amicus brief in support of multiple lawsuits against her illegal pause.

As the MTA has sought to pick up the pieces of the \$16.5 billion dollar hole Governor Hochul's pause created, the Governor has insisted that her pause was driven by vague concerns about "affordability". This thinly veiled political interference is an insult to New Yorkers' intelligence. Fifteen dollars is an unbearable expense for wealthier drivers but just fine for railroad riders who commute into the Central Business District on the LIRR and Metro-North? Get serious.

Governor Hochul's pause is also a slap in the face to the tens of thousands of New Yorkers who made their voices heard in the years-long public input process, which most recently broke two-to-one in favor of congestion pricing, not to mention thousands of professional staff at the MTA who worked diligently for half a decade to implement the law.

If the benefits of congestion pricing and the \$15 billion in revenue it was set to bring in were not clear before Governor Hochul's pause, they certainly are now. Accessibility upgrades at 23 subway and two LIRR stations, new electric buses and subway cars, hundred of millions of dollars in climate mitigations in

environmental justice communities, upgrades to Depression-era signals and equipment on the B, D, F, and M trains that would improve train frequency and reliability, and replacement cars for ancient M-3s on the LIRR and Metro-North are all facing an uncertain future.

Also in jeopardy are the 100,000+ private-sector jobs that are counting on the revenue congestion pricing will generate to build the infrastructure that moves the region that moves the world. Governor Hochul's insistence that her pause won't affect contract awards is an outright lie. There are two steadfast rules when it comes to building infrastructure: you can't award contracts with money you don't have, and nothing gets cheaper the longer you wait. This is one of fifteen myths the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA dispelled in their [joint report](#) with the New York Building Congress.

Months into Governor Hochul's pause, we, like the millions of New York City Transit and LIRR riders we represent on the MTA Board, have heard zilch about when she plans to unpaue the pause. The alternative funding sources proposed thus far have all [failed](#) to meet the mark. Instead, we've watched first-hand from the board room as the urgency of paying for the MTA's State of Good Repair work comes into focus. Many parts of the MTA's system are antiquated and facing an omnipresent threat from climate change. Just last month the subway flooded once again due to heavy rains, landslides shut down the Danbury and Waterbury branches on Metro-North (the latter branch has yet to reopen), and severe flooding hit Suffolk County.

Instead of tackling these challenges head-on, our hands are now tied. Congestion pricing is the law of the land and constitutes 30% of the MTA construction funding, called the capital

program, through 2024 and 50% of remaining work.

Governor Hochul's congestion pricing pause is also hurting the MTA's operating budget which pays the tens of thousands of MTA employees who operate the system as well as gas and electricity. Without the investment congestion pricing was set to make possible, the MTA expects to spend hundreds of millions more to repair outdated equipment and idle buses in gridlock Manhattan traffic, all without the substantial increase in new transit riders congestion pricing would have created.

In congestion pricing, we have the opportunity to both protect this critical infrastructure from the adverse effects of climate change and lower our own emissions by encouraging more people to ride our transit system – the most expansive in North America. We just need Governor Hochul to follow the law and unpaue the pause.

With more than 22 million residents and 10.7 million jobs, the Manhattan CBD and the surrounding 28 counties comprise the most populous and economically significant metropolitan region in the United States. The MTA network is an asset at \$1.5 trillion, a system other cities clearly envy. Despite this, Governor Hochul seems content to let it wither on the vine.

We support the lawsuits because the MTA system, and the millions of riders who count on it, are worth fighting for.

*Andrew Albert is the longest-serving MTA Board Member and Chair of the New York City Transit Riders Council.*

*Gerard Bringmann is an MTA Board Member, Chair of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA, and Chair of the LIRR Commuter Council.*

## RUN CANADA REPORT: SUMMER 2024

By Ken Westcar

Aficionados of North American public transportation may well note a change in the status quo as travellers start to turn their attention away from cars and planes to passenger trains for journeys up to 500 miles or so. Contrarian governments at the federal and provincial/state level are slowly conceding that passenger trains be a part of the public mobility mix with evidence of Brightline's success in Florida and growing demand for Amtrak and VIA Rail services.

Air Canada may also be reading the tea leaves on this shift by asking to join the Cadence consortium, one of the three bidders for the proposed Quebec City to Toronto (eventually Windsor) high frequency rail project under the VIA-HFR brand. Most RUN newsletter readers will now be familiar with this project and current information is available at: [HFR - High Frequency Rail \(hfr-tgf.ca\)](https://hfr-tgf.ca)

Canadian rail advocates were initially alarmed at this announcement, since the historic travails of Canada's airline

industry caused successive federal governments to study and then shelve high-speed rail projects to funnel cash to Canada's flag carrier and its competitors when airline revenues evaporated during global financial and pandemic crises. Given the cost challenges within the global airline industry, could we see a repeat of this?

We all know what happened during former airline executive Richard A. Anderson's tenure as president of Amtrak between 2017 and 2020. Short-term thinking and promoting the retirement of many seasoned, senior managers with deep passenger rail expertise harmed Amtrak and its recovery continues to this day. It was proof-positive that running a passenger rail operation like an airline is impractical and invites disaster. Even the existing VIA Rail corridor operations are being tainted by new airline-style fees for baggage, seat selection and parking, which will certainly deter some budget-conscious travellers.

The initial alarm at Air Canada's possible involvement in the HFR project has

moderated somewhat, given the other Cadence consortium partners' credentials including financial and project execution heft. Perhaps Air Canada is willing to sacrifice its short-haul business in Windsor to Quebec City corridor (services to Sarnia and Kingston, Ontario have already been discontinued) to participate in a grander intermodal exercise like it has in place in Europe with existing passenger rail operators. European governments are moving to ban short-haul flights where there is a rail service covering the same origins and destinations with a journey time of two hours or less.

This may be apparent on the bottom of the teacup, but there are some interesting challenges. Firstly, can Air Canada wait for up to two decades before HFR is built and operational between, at least, Toronto and Montreal or Quebec City, given that there will be no shovels in the ground for another two years or so and the project scope may creep to include direct and very costly access to Toronto and Montreal airports, like Frankfurt, Germany.

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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
Richard Rudolph, Chair	Northampton, MA	NARP / TrainRiders Northeast, Maine Rail Group
Andrew Albert, Vice-Chair	New York, NY	New York City Transit Riders Council
Chuck Bode, Membership Secretary	Philadelphia, PA	Tri-State Citizens' Council on Transportation
David Peter Alan, Esq.	South Orange, NJ	Lackawanna Coalition
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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](mailto:rrodolph1022@gmail.com)

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## NEW AMTRAK SCHEDULE DISTRIBUTION PROGRAM IN NEW ENGLAND TO INCREASE RIDERSHIP



*Amtrak schedules on display at the Burlington, VT station.*

**By Dan Peacock**

While ridership gains in Vermont, New Hampshire and Western Massachusetts were impressive between FY 2022 and 2023 (80,684 or 33.2%), area passenger rail advocates have not been satisfied with Amtrak's cessation of printed schedules in 2019, a tradition that spanned 180 years. Therefore, a handful of individuals have developed an expanded distribution program that aims to put physical schedules in as many locations as possible along the routes of the *Vermont*, *Valley Flyer*, *Ethan Allan Express*, *Berkshire Flyer* and *Thruway Bus*.

By the end of July, we placed about 600 schedules at 10 locations, including 8 Amtrak stations and two Chambers of Commerce. By the end of August, we estimate that we will have placed about 1150 schedules at 14 locations. So far, we have received nothing but positive feedback, as people overseeing stations or visitor centers are happy to provide the public with answers to questions about where and when Amtrak trains and buses are due.

The process of starting such a schedule distribution program involves schedules,

which often can be found on the Rail Passengers Association (RPA); permission to place schedules at locations, a printer, and people to distribute and monitor distribution. Once printed, the schedules can be mailed very cheaply via "Media Rate" to individuals or organizations. In our program, Carl Fowler, Jim Frisk, Sharon Wood and Ben Heckscher are doing the bulk of distribution, but the Chambers of Commerce are also assisting. As an added benefit, the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTRANS) and Ben's "Trains In The Valley" also post links to the schedules on their websites. Finally, "Vermont Vacations," Vermont's Official Tourism site, has agreed to link to the schedules in the future.

If anyone is interested in starting a similar program, please contact me, and I can go into more detail.

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*Dan Peacock is a member of Rail Users' Network and Rail Passengers Association.*

## RUN CANADA REPORT: SUMMER 2024

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Secondly, any assumption that Canadian National (CN) will yield additional track slots on its Dundas and Kingston subdivisions, the rail artery between these two cities, to allow worthwhile, interim service increases by the current VIA Rail, is likely unrealistic. Unless, of course, the winning consortium foots CN's bill for infrastructure improvements.

The third wrinkle in this is that VIA Rail corridor operations may be the responsibility of the winning, private consortium soon after they are selected and under contract, possibly in 2025. Given that VIA Rail ticket prices recover only about 50% of operating costs, how will the consortium handle this long-term, negative cash flow while HFR is under construction for several decades? If the federal government continues to subsidize VIA tickets while operations are the responsibility of the private partner, it would be better to leave VIA Rail as a federal crown corporation, particularly as its current management is laser-focused on schedule improvements and the introduction of new Siemens-built trains.

While there are many questions over the future of passenger rail in the Windsor to Quebec City corridor, it does appear that better modal balance could be in the offing as airlines look to the future and realise that traveler preferences and environmental concerns are evolving and they need to adapt to satisfy their stakeholders and customers. One would hope that this means a constructive attempt at intermodality rather than a more subtle plot to, yet again, derail passenger trains. Bizarre or logical? Time will tell.

*Ken Westcar is Secretary, Transport Action Ontario.*

# NEW JERSEY TRANSIT'S RIDERS HAD A ROUGH SUMMER, BUT THE AGENCY GIVES THEM AN UNEXPECTED GIFT

*By David Peter Alan*

Many of New Jersey Transit's riders have called this past summer the "Summer of Hell" due to the many cancellations, annulments, and delays they suffered as they traveled to their destinations. The situation was so bad at times that the agency's rail woes became almost a daily occurrence. Longtime Lackawanna Coalition member Gary R. Kazin posted NJT's delays and cancellations on a blog list under the heading "Deja Vu Department" throughout the summer.

When he took office in 2018, Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat, blamed Chris Christie, his Republican predecessor, for numerous train cancellations and delays. This summer was Murphy's turn to face the criticism. The agency's problems affected many of its rail and light rail lines, from the Amtrak-owned Northeast Corridor (NEC) to the River Line light rail between Trenton and Camden, and spread elsewhere through North and Central Jersey. Murphy ordered talks between operating executives at Amtrak and NJT in an effort to reduce delays that affected NJT trains because Amtrak's trains on the NEC had also been delayed. Because Amtrak owns the NEC and that line is the spine for a number of NJT routes, delays on Amtrak can have a ripple effect on NJT's trains not only on the NEC to Trenton, but also on the Morris & Essex, North Jersey Coast and Raritan Valley Lines. Those effects can also spread out to other lines that originate at Hoboken but connect with trains on the NEC at Secaucus Junction. There had been instances when NJT trains were stuck for several hours at New York's Penn Station, and another time for a similar length of time in the tunnel leading to Penn Station.

As the long summer wore on, Murphy ordered NJT officials to allow riders to enjoy eight days of fare-free travel on the agency's trains, buses, and light rail. The "fare holiday" lasted from Monday,

August 26, through Labor Day, the following Monday. Monthly commuters got a 25% discount on their September tickets. Business groups objected strongly to free rides, because taxes on the largest corporations in the state had just been increased, in part to pay for keeping the current level of transit service (or close to it) running for the next few years. The "Corporate Transit Tax" is a 2.5% surcharge on top of the regular 9% corporate tax on profits earned through doing business in New Jersey. Only corporations making \$10 million or more from their operations in the Garden State are required to pay the tax; about 600 companies, more than 80% of which are incorporated outside New Jersey.

One group of riders with an additional concern are those who use the Kingsland station in the town of Lyndhurst, in Bergen County. The agency plans to improve the next station on the "Main Line"; the Lyndhurst station, which is located about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile away. At a hearing held on August 14, a number of riders who use the Kingsland station showed up to object, as did members of the Lackawanna Coalition and the New Jersey Association of Railroad Passengers (NJ-ARP). NJ Transit acknowledged that 290 riders use the station daily, and the Lackawanna Coalition noted that the agency normally eliminates stations only when they have far fewer riders. Kingsland ridership is about average for the system. The Coalition also argued that eliminating Kingsland would also kill an important transfer opportunity to a major bus route between Newark and Hackensack, and that the Kingsland and Lyndhurst stations are sufficiently far apart that both should be kept open.

The Lackawanna Coalition is also involved with two new projects. One is the revival of its Station Inspection Program, which was discontinued about 20 years ago, and is now returning.

Coalition members and other interested persons can inspect NJT's stations and report the results on a form contained on the Coalition's website: [www.lackawannacoalition.org](http://www.lackawannacoalition.org). The Coalition plans to publish the results on the site and share them with NJ Transit.

The other initiative is geared toward riders whose train has been canceled or seriously delayed, and who need advice about alternate transportation. NJT has a web page denoted "ABCs" ("Alternate, Back-up and Contingency"), but the information there is not complete. The Lackawanna Coalition "knows its ABCs" too, and is compiling more-comprehensive information about alternate transportation that is available at the stations along NJT's rail lines, and when it runs. That information will also be posted on the Coalition's website when the project is completed.

*David Peter Alan is a RUN Board member and Chair Emeritus of the Lackawanna Coalition, based in South Orange, NJ.*

**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](mailto:rrudolph1022@gmail.com), and get published!

## SAVE THE DATE FOR RUN'S FALL VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

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Rail Advocates, will talk about the Dallas-Fort Worth-Houston Intercity Passenger Rail Corridor.

Todd Liebman, President of All Aboard Arizona, will talk about the Tucson-Phoenix 'Sun Corridor' initiative that recently received a Corridor ID grant

A panel discussion will also be held on how rail advocates can effectively advocate at the state level to influence legislators to provide funds to support rail projects beyond the second and third phase of the I.D. Corridor Program. The speakers include: Peter LeCody, President, Texas Rail Advocates and Steve Roberts, President, Rail Passenger Association of CA & NV

We are also reaching out to the FRA to provide a spokesperson who can talk about the I.D. Corridor Program and to the former mayor of Macon, Georgia, who hopefully will be available to talk about the proposed Atlanta to Savannah, Georgia Rail Project.

Closing Remarks will be provided by David Peter Alan, Contributing Editor, **Railway Age** / RUN Board Member.

The conference is designed not only for rail advocates, but also for 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 America.

**Please note this is a free event for RUN members, but registration is required. A registration fee for non-members is \$25, which includes RUN membership through 2025.**

**Please be sure to register by November 1 so that we can send along the info**

**needed to attend RUN's Virtual Fall Conference. To register, please go to our website [railusers.net](http://railusers.net), and click on the "to register" link.**

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

## TRANSIT ACROSS THE NATION FACES A FISCAL CLIFF

*Continued from page 1*

in the country is facing today and will continue to face in coming years. In short, transit is necessary to get people to their jobs and other places, especially in and near cities, but there will not be any more money coming from the feds to keep transit going; as necessary as it is for local economies and the well-being of local residents.

To find out how transit agencies are doing in their efforts to raise the funds needed to keep their service at reasonable levels, I checked on the financial situations of the largest transit systems in the nation and reported those reports in a multi-part summer series on the *Railway Age* website, [www.railwayage.com](http://www.railwayage.com). In that series, I examined the difficulties faced by major transit providers in New York City and vicinity on the New York side of the Hudson, New Jersey, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and the Washington, DC area. Most of those providers are "legacy" systems, where rail transit and regional trains (sometimes still called "commuter trains") have served their metropolitan areas for more than a century. The regions in and around Los Angeles and Washington, DC added rail transit after the demise of the original streetcars in those areas. This report is, in effect, a summary of the more-detailed reporting I did for *Railway Age* over the past few months.

The biggest bright spot among these providers is New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), which

operates the New York City subways, the Long Island Rail Road, Metro-North, the Staten Island Railway, and hundreds of bus lines in New York City's five boroughs. Through a combination of new taxes and fees, with proceeds going to the MTA, the system has been able to project balanced budgets through FY27 (fiscal years for all agencies mentioned here run from July 1 to June 30). Unlike all other agencies mentioned in this report, the MTA now has increased funding that is permanent, rather than temporary. While that news is generally good for New York City and its transit riders, the MTA's capital budget has taken a hit with Gov. Kathy Hochul's decision to halt the highly controversial Congestion Pricing program that would have imposed tolls on motor vehicles entering Manhattan south of 60th Street and allocate the proceeds for capital improvements on New York City Transit (80%), with some for the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North (10% each).

One salient fact about New York City is that it has the largest percentage of non-motorists in the country, and most of them need transit, so the system has a strong numerical constituency that does not exist elsewhere. RUN Vice-Chair Andrew Albert, who is also a rider-representative on the MTA Board, told this writer: "The State Legislature and the governor are finally treating the MTA as the essential service it is, similar to police, fire and sanitation. They have given us a balanced budget for the next five years. I have been on the Board since 2002 and never remember anything like that."

Some New Jerseyans take New Jersey Transit (NJT) to go to NYC, and many use it for trips within the Garden State. Until now, that agency never had a legislatively-authorized and dedicated source of funds. That changed this year with the "Corporation Transit Fee," as Gov. Phil Murphy called it. It is an additional 2.5% tax, on top of the standard corporate rate of 9%, on profits earned from operating in the state. It only applies to businesses earning \$10 million or more from

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## RESTORING PASSENGER TRAIN SERVICE TO MIDDLE AMERICA

*By Eric Clausen*

How one views Amtrak depends on where one lives. If one lives in a community located along Amtrak's Northeast Corridor or along one of that corridor's connecting rail corridors, along one of the West Coast rail corridors, or even along one of a few rail corridors radiating out of Chicago, Amtrak service can be viewed quite favorably. Trains are comfortable, train frequencies can be good and on time performance is usually respectable. But then there is Middle America where a few hundred Middle America communities see Amtrak's long-distance trains and the remaining thousands of communities see no Amtrak or other passenger train service at all.

Most Amtrak long-distance trains serving Middle America communities offer amenities like comfortable coach seating, sleeping cars, dining and lounge car facilities, and usually offer good on-board services, but typically those trains operate only once a day or less (in each direction) and frequently have serious timekeeping problems. Senior citizens living in the communities now served by those Amtrak long-distance trains and in the thousands of communities that now have no passenger train service at all can remember the days before Amtrak, when many of their communities were served by two or more usually on-time long-distance trains (in each direction) which, like today's Amtrak long-distance trains, also offered comfortable coach seating, sleeping cars, dining and lounge car facilities, and good on-board services.

For many Middle America communities, the formation of Amtrak was a passenger transportation disaster. Most of the then remaining Middle America passenger trains were discontinued overnight with much of the equipment from those discontinued Middle America passenger trains being sent to operate in other parts of the country. In the fifty-some years since Amtrak's formation, progress has been made on improving passenger train services along

the Northeast Corridor and along the Northeast Corridor's various connecting rail corridors as well as along several West Coast rail corridors. But with the exception of a few rail corridors radiating out of Chicago, Middle America is still stuck with an almost static and skeletal long-distance passenger train network that is not much different from what the Amtrak formation disaster produced.

It can be argued that if Amtrak had not been formed, Middle America would have lost all of its remaining passenger train services which, like passenger train services elsewhere, were losing money. It was clear at the time that the freight railroads wanted to get out of the passenger train business. Amtrak deserves credit for preserving at least some of that remaining Middle America passenger train service, which otherwise almost certainly would have been soon lost. However, it is difficult for passenger train advocates living in Middle America to watch while the Northeast Corridor and its connecting passenger train corridors and the West Coast passenger train corridors keep seeing passenger train improvements while being told that Amtrak ridership data shows most Middle America regions do not have sufficient population densities to support more and improved conventional passenger train services.

Since Amtrak, Congress and most state governments do not seem interested in providing Middle America with additional passenger train services, passenger train advocates may want to study Brightline's Florida operation. Brightline was created by the Florida East Coast Railroad owners, who, almost certainly after doing market research (that probably looked at how to develop some of their real estate holdings), decided the Miami-Orlando corridor had a much higher passenger train ridership potential than what Amtrak ridership data suggested. Without seeking big government grants, the Brightline owners then developed and implemented a business plan to compete with Amtrak by operating fast

and frequent conventional passenger train service on the Miami-Orlando corridor.

Brightline is already a success in terms of demonstrating that Amtrak ridership data does not indicate a rail corridor's ridership potential. Brightline has taken a travel market that Amtrak neglected and turned it into one of America's busiest passenger rail corridors. Brightline has demonstrated that Amtrak simply does not offer frequent enough service to properly measure Middle America's passenger train ridership potential. Also, Brightline has shown that when offered fast and frequent train service with good equipment and connecting services, large numbers of Americans will ride passenger trains. What would happen if Brightline could also demonstrate that fast and frequent conventional passenger trains can be profitable?

Rail advocates need to make sure that Brightline's fast and frequent conventional passenger trains are a financial success. To do so, passenger train advocates need to ask Congress to develop a tax credit program that will enable Brightline (and any other privately owned railroad that wants to get back in the passenger train business) to recover most or all of their passenger train related infrastructure costs. Such a tax credit program could be a giant step in leveling the playing field so privately owned railroads might want to get back in the passenger train business. With the right kind of tax credit program, freight railroads might have an incentive to do what Amtrak is apparently unable to do, and that is to increase train frequencies on existing long-distance routes and to restore passenger train service to many hundreds of the Middle America communities which now lack passenger train service.

*Eric Clausen is a RUN member who served as a member of the Amtrak Customer Advisory Committee from 1996 to 1999 and who often views passenger train service from a Middle America perspective.*

## TRANSIT ACROSS THE NATION FACES A FISCAL CLIFF

*Continued from page 6*

New Jersey operations, which means about 600 companies are affected, and most are incorporated in other states. The measure is expected to bring in about \$750 to \$800 million; roughly the anticipated amount of NJT's shortfalls over the next several years. The new tax is temporary, though. It will expire in 2029, and this year's proceeds will go to the state's general fund. They will not be used for transit until the next fiscal year starts in July 2025. Still, it marks the first dedicated funding for the agency since it was founded. The legislation that will help pay for NJ Transit is not a permanent solution, but a reprieve.

None of the other providers we studied (except NYMTA) received permanent new funding sources, either. All of them got their own reprieves, and some of those temporary measures will expire soon. It appears that transit in and around San Francisco and Los Angeles will continue to operate without major service cuts through FY26, thanks to state measures that will provide \$5 billion in funding; a large amount, considering that the state is running a \$31 billion deficit. San Diego is not doing quite as well, with financial problems expected to crop up during the summer of 2025.

In the Nation's Capital, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), which operates six lines on Metro Rail and many bus routes, will survive through FY26. The agency has restrictions on its financing and faces a "jurisdictional jumble" (as I reported in *Railway Age* in August 2023) with operations within the District and nearby Maryland and Virginia, and accountability to all three of those jurisdictions, as well as the Feds.

The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) and Metra, which runs regional rail service in Chicagoland, have enough money to last for now, but those agencies will face the fiscal cliff late in 2025 or early in 2026. Two other major systems in the Northeast are facing particularly difficult situations: the MBTA (the "T") in Boston and SEPTA in

Philadelphia. Both operate multi-modal systems, which include metropolitan-style (heavy rail) lines, light rail, streetcars, regional trains and many bus routes. The T could end up in severe trouble when the current fiscal year ends at the end of next June, while SEPTA could face severe shortfalls as soon as this fall.

A deal to fund transit in Pennsylvania fell through, despite Gov. Josh Shapiro's efforts. While Democrats hold a thin majority in the General Assembly, Republicans hold the Senate. The funding bill for transit that would have given SEPTA \$160 million (along with aid for Pittsburgh, which also has rail transit) was not enacted, but SEPTA was given a \$51 million emergency payment, which could run out as soon as later this fall.

Meanwhile at the T in Boston, General Manager Philip Eng, who came from the Long Island Rail Road and brought a good reputation with him, has been doing the right things. He has been concentrating on bringing the system into a state of good repair, and has restructured the regional rail system (the agency still uses the term "commuter rail" to describe the mode) from a commuter-centered schedule with limited "off-peak" weekday service to regional transportation that runs hourly throughout the service day on most lines. Trains run every 75 or 90 minutes on some lines, and more-frequently on the Dorchester Branch to Fairmount. The standard service level on weekends is every two hours. Yet, with all the benefits that these policies have brought to the riders in Boston and nearby communities, money problems persist. While the agency can keep current levels of service going for the current fiscal year, that does not hold after June 30, 2025.

Like California, Illinois and other states, Massachusetts is having its own financial difficulties. A model where the states pay most or all of the costs of establishing routes and running trains (as exemplified by Amtrak in its *ConnectsUS* plan to establish new corridor-length routes) and transit in its cities and towns could sound good in theory, but does not work in practice, because not enough revenue is coming into the coffers of many states to pay for the services that the residents of those states want.

Transit is an example. For the non-

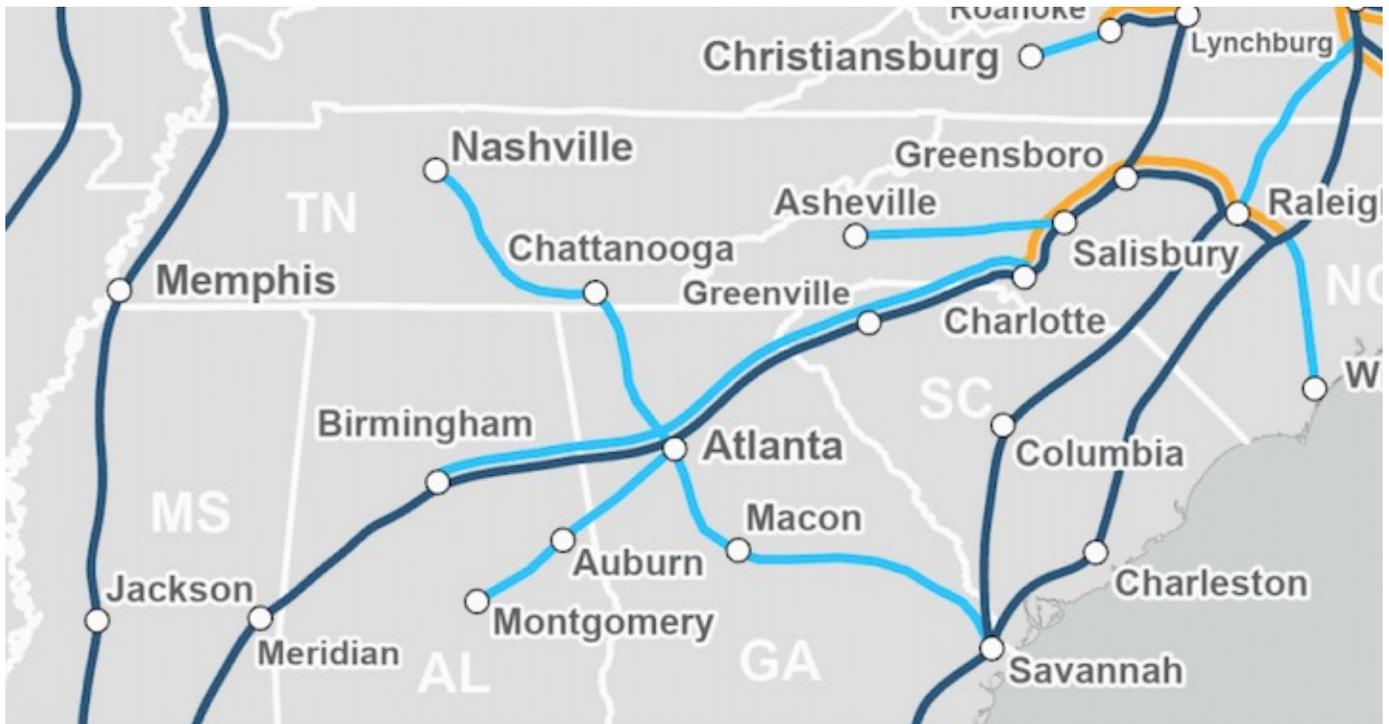
motorists who need it for all of their mobility needs, it provides a vital service, without which it is unlikely that they could survive; much less live well. There are some motorists who use transit, and many of them commute to jobs in the city core. There are fewer such commuters today than there were before the virus struck, though. While motorists who use transit at least from time to time might support the initiative of spending money to improve operations that give everybody more service, the vast majority of motorists do not care about transit. It is even reasonable to conclude that most would probably not want to spend the money to keep it running.

So elected officials will face a critical question concerning transit over the next several years. For many transit providers, that will start next year. In short, the big question is where the existing funds should go. A subtopic of that inquiry will be how much should be spent on keeping transit going for the people who need it, in the hope that it will also attract motorists whose fares also help pay the bills. Except in New York City, though, motorists outnumber non-motorists, and motorists who ride transit (usually trains and other rail transit, and seldom buses, unless they have no other choice at the time) do not add enough riders to constitute a majority when added to the non-motoring population.

The big question is how much are state and local governments willing to spend, so non-motorists, and also those motorists who want a professional transit operator to "do the driving" for them sometimes, can keep the amount of mobility to which they had become accustomed, both before and since the COVID-19 virus struck.

It's a hard question, but the wrong answer could deprive millions of Americans whose mobility is limited of a large amount of the freedom and the opportunity to go places that they can enjoy today.

*David Peter Alan is a RUN Board member and a Contributing Editor at Railway Age.*



## THE EFFORT TO RESTORE PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE FROM ATLANTA TO SAVANNAH AND THE POSSIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING HIGH-SPEED RAIL BETWEEN THESE TWO CITIES

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

This is the second in a series of articles regarding the FRA I.D. Corridor Program and efforts to expand or restore passenger rail service in the U.S. The Georgia Department of Transportation has recently received three \$500,000 awards to explore creating new passenger rail corridors from Atlanta to Savannah; from Atlanta to Charlotte, NC; and from Atlanta to Chattanooga and other major cities in Tennessee. Given space limitations the major focus here is on restoring passenger rail service which once existed from Atlanta to Savannah and the possibility of establishing high speed rail service between these two cities.

The last passenger train which served the two cities, called the *Nancy Hanks II*, made its first trip from Savannah to Atlanta on July 17, 1947. It was a

popular Central of Georgia Railway, and later Southern Railway, all-coach, reserved-seat train with grill lounge service. It was named after a short lived, but famous steam special, the *Nancy Hanks* which operated in 1892 and 1893. Despite its popularity, ridership on the *Nancy Hanks II* declined in the 1960s, resulting in it making its last run from Savannah to Atlanta on April 30, 1971, the day before Amtrak took over most passenger rail service in the U.S.

The idea of establishing high-speed rail between Atlanta and Savannah dates back to April 1985, when Lt. Governor Zell Miller and 150 other Atlantans served on a trade delegation to France to celebrate the inaugural Delta Air Lines flight to Paris. Both he and Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young were impressed with taking the TGV from Paris to Lyon, traveling at about 163 miles per hour. Although Miller was elected governor a few years later, he never followed

through "on the dream of bringing high-speed rail to Georgia." After the 1996 Summer Olympic games were held in Atlanta, the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce joined forces with 14 other major metro chambers of commerce in Georgia and 5 surrounding states to create the Southeastern Economic Alliance to promote a high-speed rail network in the region.

The idea of connecting Atlanta and Savannah with high-speed rail was once again brought up by Atlanta's Mayor, Kasim Reed, in 2012. Such a train, he believed, would change the complexion of Georgia from two Georgias with two different economies to a state with a transportation infrastructure that could help reinforce the notion of Georgia becoming "the logistics hub of the Western hemisphere in the 21st Century."

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## THE EFFORT TO RESTORE PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE FROM ATLANTA TO SAVANNAH

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Although there is no commuter or intercity passenger rail service in the state, GDOT has participated in several studies that designated two high-speed rail corridors that pass through the state. They included the Gulf Coast High-Speed Rail Corridor from Houston through New Orleans and Birmingham to Atlanta; and the Southeast High-Speed Rail (SEHSR) Corridor from Washington, D.C. to Jacksonville, FL passing through Richmond, Charlotte, Atlanta, Macon and Savannah. This was a variation of the original federally designated high-speed rail corridor. The original corridor travels from Atlanta to Macon and Jesup, GA and onto Jacksonville. This route was included in the route alternative analysis; however, the route including Savannah, GA was chosen based on the increase in ridership and revenue associated with the higher population. The Savannah metropolitan statistical area (MSA) is the fourth largest travel market in the state of Georgia. Since 2015, GDOT has invested over \$6 million in advancing passenger rail service with the completion of a Tier 1 Environmental Impact Study for both Atlanta to Charlotte High Speed Rail and Atlanta to Chattanooga Passenger Rail. No mention was made in the GDOT 2021 State Rail Plan regarding train service from Atlanta to Savannah.

Over the past two decades, the corridor between Atlanta and Macon has also been studied as a potential commuter rail line to serve populations traveling between these cities. This commuter rail line would encompass a 103-mile corridor with 13 potential stations, including the proposed Atlanta multi-modal passenger terminal, Hapeville, Morrow, Hampton, Griffin, Forsyth and Macon. The study estimates that the cost for this project is approximately \$400

million (2010 dollars) and operating costs about \$25 million per year.

Despite the dreams of high speed rail between the two cities, passenger rail service in Georgia is still currently only provided on four Amtrak routes, three of which serve coastal Georgia cities while the *Crescent* operates from New York City to Atlanta on its way to New Orleans. Thanks to the efforts of U.S. Senator John Ossoff of Georgia, who champions efforts to expand high-speed rail across the Southeast to drive economic growth and increase mobility and connectivity, the idea is once again alive. GDOT has been awarded a FY2023 Consolidated Rail Infrastructure & Safety Improvements (CRISI) Grant Congressionally Directed - Atlanta to Savannah \$8 million Passenger Rail Corridor grant. Senator Ossoff believes the awarding of this grant along with the FRA I.D. Corridor \$500,000 award could be a major game changer, but has stated in a press release that it "is a long-term project that will require cooperation and strong execution at all levels of government, but it has the potential to unlock huge gains in mobility and quality of life for Georgians."

GDOT has provided the \$2 million match required of the CRISI grant from the state's rail budget for a total of \$10 million along with the FRA \$500,000 grant and has started to work on the project. The project schedule, however, "stretches into 2018 when the breadth of necessary design and planning would be completed before construction could happen." The project study area, according to GDOT's website encompasses approximately 11,300 square miles and includes a number of cities including Atlanta, Athens, Statesboro, Milledgeville, Macon, Augusta, Savannah and more. The first three phases are scheduled to be completed by next year. It would include identifying alternative routes based on need and conducting an environmental assessment for the project. A cost-benefit analysis is slated for 2026, along with identification of potential funding sources for construction. The schedule of work ends

with an environmental impact statement in 2028 to satisfy the National Environmental Policy Act.

Already, there are some concerns about the possible route from Atlanta to Savannah. At a meeting of the I-75 Central Corridor Coalition, which was recently held in Macon, the former Mayor, Robert Reichert of Macon said, "We want to influence it to become an Atlanta, Macon, Savannah project." He said it would be great for tourism and help with both short and long distance travel. "You can connect Charlotte and Savannah and Nashville and Birmingham, but it also has implications for long-distance travel. We want to be connected to the national network and we don't want to be left standing at the station after it already left." The I-75 Central Corridor Coalition which is a 501(c)6 organization membership includes 19 elected officials and community economic development partners from seven Georgia counties.

Amit Bose, the current FRA administrator who also attended the meeting, was also quite critical. He mentioned that other Southern states and rail projects are farther down the project pipeline due to their committing their own state funds, too. He pointed out that both Virginia and North Carolina have made investments in rail. "It wasn't easy. And they did it on a bipartisan basis. Republicans, Democrats working together. They are years ahead of Georgia when it comes to passenger rail." Thomas L. Stennis III, Amtrak's director for government affairs, who also attended the meeting, added that both Mississippi and Louisiana have put up money to match federal rail spending. What is needed is champions in the state legislature who can convince their counterparts to provide the state share to fund passenger rail projects going forward.

Amtrak officials view the Atlanta - Macon - Savannah Corridor, which spans 220 miles, as "a sweet spot for intercity passenger rail service, yet there is no direct connection between the cities."

Atlanta is the ninth largest metropolitan  
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## NORTHEAST CORNER – MAINE NEWS

By Peter Cole

Maine has a rich history of railroading and has many outstanding museums operating “Two Footers,” heritage trains and model trains, and one museum focused on the trolley car era. As Maine train advocates, our challenge is to celebrate the past but remind the public that rail transit must play a major part in the state’s future economy.

As rail advocates, we are working to change the public perception of trains as “yesterday’s technology.” The public simultaneously complains about the changing climate and tax money going to support the road system but does not realize that the State of Maine purchased vacated railroad lines years ago to protect future options. Environmental groups push for “active transportation” while seeming not to notice that countries that successfully have “active transportation” also have an “active rail” transit system. Housing advocates seem to forget that not only is housing expensive, but requirements for parking spaces and asking people to spend \$12,000 a year on a car makes the housing even more unaffordable. Maine businesses want more workers but forget that workers need affordable housing and transit. Towns and cities benefit when tourists stop and spend time in a place rather than just driving through. Over eighty million people live within a one-day drive to Maine. In the summer, it seems they are all on the roads at the same time and with congestion and parking woes they cannot really enjoy their visit. When they can arrive by train, they arrive relaxed and ready to enjoy a vacation.

The Maine rail organizations are working diligently to get out the message that whether it is the environment, quality of life, tourism, or the cost of living, trains are a key component. Getting that message out there takes time and effort. This summer for the first time the two major rail advocacy groups in Maine, the Maine Rail Group and Train Riders Northeast, started hosting joint booths at summer fairs and events around the state to educate the public

about the benefits of rail, and to counter the ongoing efforts to tear out tracks and replace them with multiuse recreational trails. At the booths, the rail advocates focus on “rails with trails” and found most people were in favor of that. Many locals told stories of how they remembered hearing the train horns, and wished service would return. Young people reported wanting transit, not cars. Event attendees supported the concept of “rails with trails” and feared that once the tracks were gone, trains would never return.

The Northern New England Rail Passenger Authority (NNEPRA), which has the job of running the one passenger line in Maine, the Downeaster, reported at their last board meeting record-breaking ridership and income so far in this calendar year. In other good news, the NNEPRA Board is presently working to move the Portland station off a spur and onto the mainline thus saving 15 minutes on the end-to-end run. Demonstrating that the public is finally understanding the advantage of trains, the town of Cumberland made a presentation to NNEPRA on how it wants to combine affordable housing and a train station.

*Peter Cole is President, Maine Rail Group.*

### THE EFFORT TO RESTORE PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE FROM ATLANTA TO SAVANNAH

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area in the U.S., growing at a 14% rate over the last decade, yet it is only served by the once daily *Crescent* service. Atlanta has added 750,000 jobs since 2000, while Savannah added 40,000 and Jacksonville added 29,500 jobs last year. The new route, which is part of Amtrak’s Vision Plan, would also connect nearly 20 Fortune 500 companies, improve mobility for underserved communities and provide reliable and efficient transportation to employment

opportunities along the corridor. The new and improved Amtrak service proposed would also enable students, their families, faculty and staff to avoid traffic between destinations and to enjoy greater productivity or relaxation while they travel.

Amtrak is seeking \$30 million in federal funding to secure a site for a new rail hub station in downtown Atlanta, which would not only serve the proposed route from Atlanta to Savannah, but also the proposed new routes from Charlotte, NC and Nashville, TN. Amtrak estimates the new facility could cost as much as \$700 million once needed infrastructure investments are made, which would include new trackage to separate passenger service from freight operations.

The existing Amtrak station was built in 1918 in what was then a suburban setting and was designed for a small number of passengers. It has a number of drawbacks, including an “under size waiting room,” poor access from the station to its single platform below, and there is no parking and it lacks connections to local transit options.

In closing, it is way too early to predict whether passenger rail will ever be restored from Atlanta to Savannah. The question of when it will be rebuilt and open for service will be explored in the preparation of the Service Development Plan. According to GDOT, this plan will contain a phased implementation plan which will propose a schedule for construction and operation, depending on funding availability. A possible source of funding is the FRA’s National Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail Grant Program, which could ultimately cover up to 80% of the cost of the project. The other 20%, however, would be provided by the state and other local sources of funding. This certainly will require not only the support of Georgia’s governor, but also a working majority of the Georgia State Legislature.

