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## SAVE THE DATE FOR RUN'S 2025 SPRING VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

### *Mixed Bag: New Transit Starts and Fiscal Cliff Service Cuts - What to Expect in 2025*

The Rail Users Network is holding its Spring 2025 Virtual Conference on May 16, 2025 from 1-5 pm. The conference will provide an update regarding what is happening at some of the major transit agencies across the states.

The program includes Phillip Eng, MBTA General Manager and CEO, who will give the keynote address regarding what he has been able to accomplish at the MBTA during the past two years.

Art Guzzetti, Vice President - Policy at the American Public Transportation Association,

will offer his thoughts regarding rail transit and the new Trump administration.

For the Fiscal Cliff Panel Presentation, panelists include:

Juliette Michaelson, Deputy Chief, Policy & External Relations, Metropolitan Transportation Authority, will speak about Congestion Pricing-how it is working, how the money raised will support the MTA's \$68 billion Capital Program, and the challenges the program is facing.

Paul Wyckoff, Chief of Government and External

Affairs at NJ Transit, will talk about how the agency is dealing with the crisis.

Erik Johanson, Senior Director of Budgets & Transformation, will talk about how SEPTA is dealing with the crisis.

Sam Sargent, Director of Strategy & Policy at Caltrain, will talk about how the agency is dealing with the fiscal crisis.

Our New Start Speakers include:

Ray Biggs, II, Senior Project Director at Maryland

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## ADVOCATES CAN'T COUNT ON POLITICIANS TO KEEP AMTRAK AND RAIL TRANSIT GOING, AND MUST KEEP FIGHTING

### **Commentary by David Peter Alan**

I don't normally engage in commentary here in the *RUN Newsletter*, although I often do so at the customary home for my writing, *Railway Age*. We are entering an extraordinary time of peril to our trains and our transit, as both of them face withering hostility from Washington and increasing uncertainty at the State level.

Customarily, I write the yearly "Passenger Rail Outlook" column, which appears in the January issue of *Railway Age Magazine*. This year's piece also appeared on the website,

[www.railwayage.com](http://www.railwayage.com), on January 7. While I have been reporting on the passenger train and rail transit beat for more than 20 years, I can honestly say that the 2025 edition was the grimmest column I have ever written, and the challenges ahead could even exceed my worst fears.

Against this backdrop, I offer some history and some cautionary suggestions. In short, my advice to all advocates for more mobility, wherever you are, is to join together, find as many allies as you can, and make your best effort to get politicians on board to support more trains

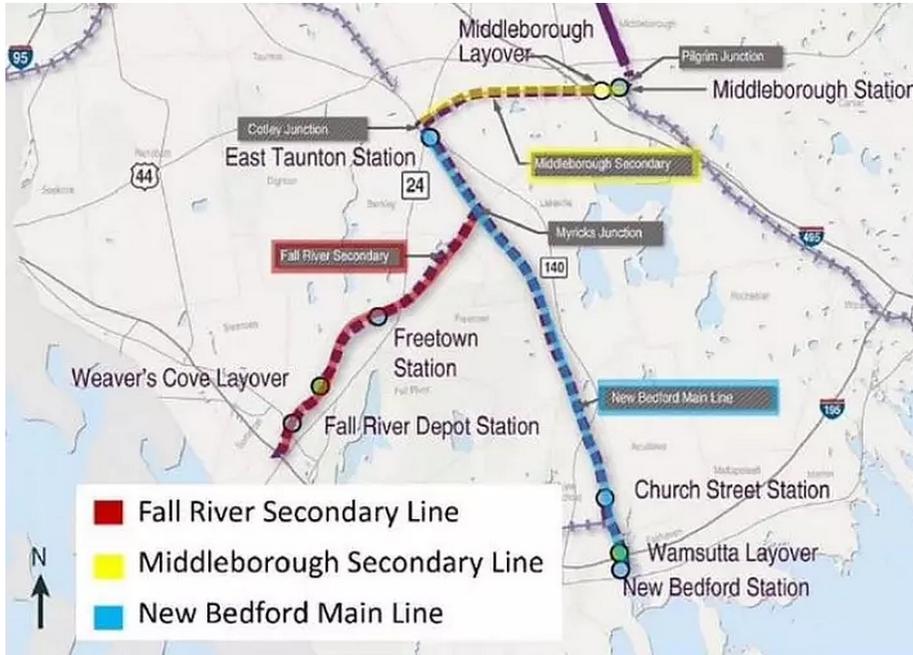
and better transit.

### **What we're facing**

I first became involved with rail advocacy 40 years ago, as part of an effort to restore half-hourly train service on New Jersey Transit's Morris & Essex Line (of Lackawanna Railroad heritage), which includes South Orange, where I live. The weekday service had been reduced to hourly and was restored later that year, only to be slashed to hourly (actually two trains

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## MBTA SOUTH COAST RAIL TO OPEN IN MARCH 2025; POSTPONED FROM 2024



Use of existing CSX freight ROWs with passenger service upgrades, allowed for this service to be built. Photo credit: MBA South Coast Rail Project.

**By Dennis Kirkpatrick**

The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) has formally announced that the new South Coast Rail Extension from Boston to the cities of New Bedford and Fall River will start revenue service on Monday, March 24, 2025. The opening is pending a final inspection by the Federal Railroad Administration. Among the cities and towns to be served will be Taunton, Freetown, New Bedford, Middleborough and Fall River. The last time any of these cities were served by rail was some 65 years ago.

“The people of Taunton, Freetown, New Bedford, Middleborough and Fall River have been waiting for passenger rail service for far too long,” said Governor Maura Healey (D-MA) in a Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) press release. “General Manager [Phil] Eng and his team aren’t kicking the can down the road. They’re delivering. We’re thrilled to soon be launching South Coast Rail service, which will make it easier for South Coast

residents to get around the state, reduce congestion and spur economic development.”

“We’re grateful for all of the input and partnership we’ve received from South Coast residents and businesses that have made this milestone possible,” said Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll (D-MA). “This project will bring better commutes while also supporting new jobs, housing and economic growth. We’re grateful for the hard work of MBTA and MassDOT teams to get this done.”

The extension of the MBTA commuter rail, or better-stated, a restoration, was at one time on the drawing board to extend southerly from a station at Stoughton, MA. However, much of the right-of-way (ROW) had become overgrown, encroached-upon in some areas, and also had a potential environmental concern due to wetlands through which it might have passed if the former ROW was followed. The second choice, now the current South Coast Rail alignment, uses an existing CSX freight line, offering an established active ROW.

“It hasn’t been an easy feat, but I’m proud of how much we have accomplished,” said MBTA South Coast Rail Program Executive Karen Antion, in a MassDOT press release. “The South Coast Rail is going to be a game-changer for the region, and we’re excited to deliver this new transportation option that will serve so many communities.”

There will be a total of 15 trips on the Fall River line and 17 trips on the New Bedford Line with a total of 32 trips between South Station and East Taunton. There will be a total of 26 trips between South Station and East Taunton on the weekends. The MBTA anticipates trains to run every 70 minutes on weekdays and every 2 hours on the weekends. This reflects the current systemwide MBTA Commuter Rail schedule plan of trains on 1-hour headways on weekdays, and 2-hour headways on weekends. In addition to direct service, there will also be shuttles operating between each terminus point and the East Taunton Station. This allows for even more frequent service, which is consistent with the all-day service model across the rest of the commuter rail network.

The East Taunton Station is located in the southeast portion of Taunton along the New Bedford Secondary, slightly northwest of the Rt. 24 highway, and just south (west in rail terms) of CSX Cotley Junction. The station driveway (an extension of the existing Industrial Drive) is reached from County Street (Rt. 140) just north of the Rt. 24/Rt. 140 interchange. In fact, a new exit ramp off Rt. 24 southbound is being created for direct access to the station.

Late night service will be offered to South Coast Stations, with the last Train leaving Boston just before

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## NOTES FROM NEW YORK: CONGESTION PRICING UPDATE

**By Andrew Albert**

New York instituted Congestion Pricing for all vehicles entering Manhattan below 60<sup>th</sup> Street on January 5, after delaying the program for months. Charges for cars entering the congestion zone is \$9 during peak periods (5 AM-9 PM) Monday-Friday, and 9AM-9PM Sat/Sun, with trucks paying a higher rate, and motorcycles a lower rate. The money raised from congestion pricing is set to help New York's MTA raise \$1 billion per year, allowing bonding to \$15 billion a year towards the MTA's Capital Program.

This will allow the upgrading of much of the infrastructure, as well as the purchase of new subway cars, commuter rail cars, installation of CBTC (Communications Based Train Control) on the Fulton St/Liberty Avenue A,C lines in Brooklyn & Queens, as well as installing CBTC on the 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue B,D,F,M lines along 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Manhattan. It will also provide funding to make many more stations ADA accessible, which is important, as only 156 out of 472 stations are currently

accessible. It will also allow for updates to many aging infrastructure issues, such as switches, tracks, power updates, drainage, resiliency work on Metro-North's Hudson Line, and many other improvements to our amazing but aging transportation system, which serves not only New York City but all of Long Island, plus Westchester, Putnam, Dutchess, Orange, & Rockland counties.

Since being turned on, traffic has eased significantly, and wait times at the major river crossings, such as the Lincoln & Holland Tunnels between NY & NJ has shortened significantly. Bridges & tunnels that span the East River, such as the Hugh Carey Tunnel, the Brooklyn, Manhattan, & Williamsburg Bridges has also seen traffic reduced, with vehicles getting to their destinations much more quickly. Air quality near many of these crossings has improved, and city buses are travelling faster than they did prior to congestion pricing. Emergency vehicles, such as Police, Fire, Sanitation, & Ambulances are also getting to their destinations more quickly, and in the case of ambulances, likely getting people to emergency rooms more

quickly. Yes, traffic has increased in other areas, such as the George Washington Bridge and the Cross Bronx Expressway, along with some other highways.

More good news - ridership on New York's subways, buses, commuter trains has increased by 1/4 of a million riders! Even some motorists, when interviewed, have said they initially were adamantly opposed to the program, but seeing how their commutes have gotten better, with much less traffic, has changed their minds. Crime has dropped on the transit system, and riders are responding to the service improvements, as well as avoiding traffic.

So what's not to like? Enter the Trump administration, who has vowed to kill congestion pricing once he got elected. On February 19, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy had a letter delivered to City & MTA officials alerting them that the Department of Transportation has withdrawn their approval of Congestion Pricing, and that

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The Rail Users' Newsletter is published quarterly by the Rail Users' Network, a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit corporation. Current board members include:

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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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# CUTTING AMTRAK'S FUNDING WILL NOT MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!

By *Eric Clausen*

The White House and Congressional conservatives are trying to make America great again by cutting taxes and by slashing government funding for numerous programs and services. What this will mean for Amtrak is yet to be determined, although there are proposals to slash and/or to completely eliminate Amtrak's federal government subsidies. If enacted without some type of replacement passenger train development and operation program, such proposals could force those state governments willing to support passenger train services to suddenly have to scramble to find ways to keep whatever Amtrak passenger services they want to preserve and probably lead to the discontinuance of many if not all of Amtrak long-distance trains.

Before proceeding, the White House and Congressional conservatives need to recognize that the quality of a nation's intercity railroad passenger system is an important measure of a nation's greatness. There was a time when the United States had the world's best railroad passenger service and that service reached into all regions of the lower 48 states. Following World War II and into the mid 1950s, America's privately-owned railroads invested heavily in new passenger train equipment and during the 1950s and early 1960s operated some of the world's finest and fastest passenger trains. But today, thanks to government policies favoring highway and airline travel, America's once great privately operated passenger train service no longer exists.

America's privately operated intercity passenger trains, no matter how nice the equipment or how well the railroads operated them, could not compete with short-sighted government policies which heavily favored and still favor highway and airline transportation. As a result, by the late 1950s, many of the newly equipped passenger trains along with

other passenger trains (some of which still used less attractive older equipment) became money losers. What had been the world's best passenger train network then began to rapidly unravel as the privately-owned railroads sought to discontinue one money-losing passenger train after another.

Amtrak was created as a federal government owned and subsidized corporation to preserve the final vestiges of what was once a great intercity passenger train system. Over the past 54 years, federal government subsidies supplemented by subsidies from some but not all states have kept Amtrak services alive and on occasion sometimes even permitted modest service improvements, especially on the Northeast Corridor and in the Pacific coast states. However, those subsidies have never been enough to restore passenger train services to many sections of the country. As a result, today numerous European and Asian countries have much better passenger rail services as the United States keeps on losing ground in the world passenger train service rankings.

A way (consistent with the prevailing conservative philosophy) to make America's passenger rail service great again is to provide incentives so railroad track owners will seek to operate the best possible passenger rail service over each of their owned track segments. To do so, the White House and Congress need to keep existing Amtrak services operating until they can develop a tax credit program which will be available to all railroad track owners (whether they be freight railroads, Amtrak, state governments, or other public agencies) based on the amount of passenger rail traffic traveling over each railroad track segment and what the railroad track owners spend to maintain and improve the track segments over which passenger trains travel.

Such tax credits would reimburse railroad track owners for a percent of

each track segment's annual maintenance and improvement expenditures. The percent of expenditures eligible for reimbursement might be determined by comparing the number of train passengers traveling over each track segment with the number of automobiles traveling on parallel highways. If freight railroads which own the track over which Amtrak's long-distance trains now travel want to receive such tax credits, they would need to partner with Amtrak or another passenger train operator (or get back in the passenger train business) so as to operate enough passenger trains over each of their track segments so as to generate the amount of passenger traffic needed to qualify for whatever tax credits the freight railroads desire to obtain.

The initial cost of such a tax credit program might be similar to what the federal government now provides in subsidies to Amtrak and to support other state and other public agency passenger train operators. That initial cost and all future costs of the tax credit program (no matter how much the passenger train network expands) would always be balanced by the actual expenditures that Amtrak, state, public transportation agencies, and freight railroads actually make to maintain and improve each track segment over which passenger trains travel and would be based on the numbers of passengers actually traveling over each of those track segments. If properly designed, such a tax credit program could provide railroad track owners with the necessary incentives to significantly grow and improve the nation's 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.*

# RUN CANADA REPORT: MARCH 2025

*By Ken Westcar*

This report is a mixed bag of news, events and opinions because the first two months of the year have been quiet on Canadian passenger rail issues. VIA Rail Canada continues to observe CN mandated 40mph grade crossings with the new Siemens trainsets due to alleged inconsistencies of shunt performance in actuating crossing gates and signals. The matter is now in litigation. More on this is in a later report.

## **Toronto to Quebec City High Frequency Rail**

The Canadian federal government paused the project several months ago and delayed the announcement of which consortium would be its private sector development partner. Those who follow the project have dispensed with the acronym "HFR" and now use "HxR" pending a decision on a top speed of 110mph or 200mph. What came as a surprise, during the second week of February, was the appointment of Maria Luisa Dominguez, former president of Adif, Spain's state rail infrastructure group, as Chief Project Management Officer for Canada's HFR.

This announcement in the rail media also included a capital cost estimate of HxR of between €53bn and €80bn (US\$55.7bn and US\$84bn), likely dependent on the choice between HFR and HSR. It's multiples of the original capital cost estimate of US\$8bn for the 110mph option. This is an eye-watering sum for even a well-heeled public-private partnership and is likely subject to significant inflation over the proposed ten-year construction period - steel and aluminium tariffs notwithstanding.

It will be interesting to see if it can survive a trade-related downturn in the Canadian economy and possibly displacement by other federal spending priorities such as defence, social programs and energy security. It could be some time before we know.

Meanwhile the bill for sunk project planning costs continues to escalate past C\$2bn.

## **A lesson for Ontario from the State of Virginia.**

Those who attended the February 7<sup>th</sup> webinar, organised by the High Speed Rail Alliance, will have witnessed exemplary lucidity by the State of Virginia on how to alleviate crippling congestion on Interstates 81 and 95, south of Washington DC. You can watch the webinar here on YouTube: [How Crippling Traffic Led One State to Find Its Own Transportation Solutions](#)

The decision to expand Virginia Passenger Rail Authority services, rather than adding more highway lanes, is a textbook case of the difference between wasteful state spending and astute, taxpayer-funded investment. VPRA's Executive Director, DJ Stadler, discussed how the two options were considered in depth and how the decision was made to pursue passenger rail. His presentation also looked to the longer-term state mobility options, most of which will consider highly integrated public transportation. He noted that taxpayers are broadly supportive because chronic traffic congestion exacts a huge toll on their personal lives and the state economy.

Transport Action Ontario attended this webinar and prepared an executive summary that can be viewed here: [Transportation Infrastructure: Virginia Invests while Ontario spends – Transport Action Ontario](#) Its target audience is the Province of Ontario that continues to promote highway development over regional rail service improvements outside the Greater Toronto/Hamilton Area (GTHA). Premier Doug Ford even went as far as suggesting a 40-mile long, multi-lane traffic tunnel under Highway 401 across Toronto to "relieve congestion". This extreme flight of fantasy was quickly panned by subject matter experts although rumours indicate a

consultant's report is under preparation. Proof positive that not only troubled canines are prone to chasing their own tails.

## **One to curl up with**

Believers in the role of passenger railways as the optimum solution for journeys of up to 500 miles or so are hardly short of good reading materials. Everything from research papers to media op-eds is available with a few keystrokes. A recent book by U.K. author, Gareth Dennis, "*How The Railways Will Fix The Future*", is an easy read of experience-based perspectives and dives deep into complexities involved in passenger train operation.

Although largely from U.K. and continental Europe viewpoints, it provides the North American reader with valuable insights into why most passenger train services in North America struggle to expand and the extreme constraints of privately-owned infrastructure and the financial demands of its owners. The book is critical of privatised passenger rail services and dissects the disaster of Britain's attempt at system privatisation and the near destruction of its once world-leading, railway equipment manufacturing industry. Nevertheless, Dennis remains optimistic and so should we.

With a cover price of US\$14.95, its 267 pages are an inexpensive read and Dennis's prose is both informative and entertaining. (Repeater Books by Random House Inc., ISBN978-1-915672-48-3) The book review writer has no commercial or financial interest in Gareth Dennis's work.

*Ken Westcar is Secretary of Transport Action Ontario.*

## REPORT FROM NEW MEXICO



*By JW Madison*

### ***Belen and the Doodlebug***

Belen is a large town about 32 miles South of Albuquerque, located along Hwy 85, I-25, and the Rio Grande. It also sits at the intersection of a North-South Rail line all up and down the state along the same alignment, and a major East-West Rail line called the BNSF Southern Transcon. This intersection is why Belen is called the Hub City.

That thing in the illustration is the "Doodlebug". This is a large old Railcar that for many years ran as a transit vehicle in revenue service between Albuquerque and Belen, carrying people, freight, the mail, and express between these places. It was very popular and economical. It was powered by a gasoline engine, later converted to diesel. Doodlebugs were very popular and efficient in short-and medium-distance service all over the country from about the '30s into the '60s.

A Doodlebug in the orbit of the Nevada Northern Railway (out of Ely, NV) can carry up to 50 people, at a fuel economy of approx.10 miles per gallon. The cars and haulages will somewhat vary, but this is a ballpark figure.

Do the math, folks. Never mind; we'll do it: 50 people at 10 mpg is 500 passenger-miles per gallon. We're assuming diesel-electric traction. How about biodiesel ?

A Doodlebug sits today in a vacant lot (future park) in Belen, open part-time for tours as part of the Harvey House Museum (1-505-861-0581). We want to see the Doodlebug restored to service between Belen and Socorro (40+ miles South of Belen), and later further (the Rail Runner handles Albuquerque-Belen just fine). We'd like to hear from anybody with Belen or Socorro (or thereabouts) connections, or more information on this wonder vehicle.

### ***The Yard Bird***

In the Albuquerque Journal, Wednesday, December 26, 2012, p A7, there exists an op ed called, "Rail Transit Smart Direction for City". This piece is inspired by the above-cited Doodlebug, the String of Pearls of onetime Albuquerque Mayor Marty Chaves, and the little brains of Rails Inc. If you don't read the whole piece (you should), look about 3/4 down the article, where we introduce our starter Streetcar shuttle between the Alvarado Transportation Center and the old Rail Yard Blacksmith Shop. We now call it the Yard Bird. It would be a good start and a long-term bargain (all Urban Rail is).

### ***Missing Links***

Just a reminder: Another thing we consider a big deal is the existence of short segments of Rail right of way scattered around the country and linking major or long-distance Rail segments. These short lines range in status from rights of way with the tracks torn up to abandoned tracks to functional routes hosting freight trains. La Junta-Pueblo CO is a shining example. We think these various links could be restored to passenger service, maybe part of a long-distance train (like the *SW Chief*) or of a Rail Runner-style connecting service; relatively quickly and Cheap. These would be conventional-speed trains. Gotta walk before we can run.

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

## NEW JERSEY REPORT: A NEW LEADER COMES TO NJ TRANSIT, WHILE SERIOUS CHALLENGES REMAIN

New Jersey Transit's riders continue to suffer, as a new leader takes office at the agency. During a time of uncertainty about New Jersey Transit (NJT) and transit generally, a new CEO took office at the agency. He is Kris Kolluri, a lawyer who has held a number of State positions over the years. He was Transportation Commissioner under Gov. Jon Corzine (2005-09). Acting as Chair of NJT's Board of Directors is part of that job, so he is familiar with the agency. His predecessor, Kevin Corbett, left on January 15 to take a position at Rutgers University, amid cheers from the business community and a mixed farewell, including jeers, from some riders and advocates.

Kolluri is generally expected to serve as an interim head, because Gov. Phil Murphy, who appointed him, will leave office early next year. As is always the case with transit agencies, the election in November will tell us more.

In the meantime, riders' woes continue, as train cancellations, annulments, delays, and missed connections continue to abound. Gary R. Kazin, a longtime member and former Secretary of the Lackawanna Coalition, which advocates for the agency's rail riders, keeps track of NJT's rider alerts on a blogging group. He calls his posts "Deja Vu Department" and he always has something to report; the most alerts he posted in a single day recently was 45.

In the meantime, local advocates have been busy. Advocates in the Town of Montclair have been pushing to have their weekend train service increased from every two hours (with trains running less-frequently in the evening) to hourly. That level of service returned to the line after a 44-year absence on Saturdays and a 51-year absence on Sundays. Local advocates claim that residents, who had previously been skeptical about having more trains, now want them. They want weekend service extended past its current endpoint at Bay Street Station (barely across the town line into Montclair) to Montclair

State University, where most weekday service terminates. They are also calling for more bus service to New York City, and the Lackawanna Coalition supports these efforts.

One battle that the Coalition and other advocates lost was to keep the Kingsland Station open. NJT had announced that it will be shut down later this year, when improvements to the Lyndhurst Station, which is about a 20-minute walk from Kingsland, are completed. There are no bus connections between the two stations, and there is now a connection at Kingsland with a bus that runs between Newark and Hackensack and provides connections to other rail services. That connection will no longer be available to riders. The Kingsland Station first opened for service in 1870.

Members of the Senior Citizens and Disabled Residents Transportation Advisory Committee, (SCDRTAC) are now protesting against an order issued by Corbett on April 19, 2024 that threatened to expel members who raise issues that he personally deemed to lie outside the Committee's purview, although a broad scope was established by statute and recognized by the agency through the Committee's first 40 years of existence. Several members, including this writer, have claimed that Corbett's expulsion threat violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, as well as State Law, and have called on Kolluri to rescind Corbett's threat against Committee members.

Until 1970, the Lackawanna Railroad ran trains from New Jersey, through the Pocono Mountains, to Scranton and beyond. The Lackawanna Coalition is joining with Pennsylvania advocates to help push for service to Scranton to be restored, and has been concentrating its efforts on telling residents in the northwestern part of the state that they once had trains and could have them again, and telling people along its traditional lines of concern that they

could have trains that serve "new" places. New Jersey Transit once studied the possibility of expanding service to Scranton, and Amtrak is now considering running on the line. Twenty-eight miles of track in western New Jersey were ripped up during the 1980s and the rest is slow, so track on most of the line must be upgraded or built back.

While the battles over the Congestion Pricing toll for vehicles entering Manhattan south of 60th Street continue, NJT has never suggested that its riders going to "the City" use the agency's trains to Penn Station or its buses to the Port Authority Bus Terminal, both of which are located within the tolling zone. The agency's Board and CEO are appointed by the governor, and Murphy has made the State the lead plaintiff in the New Jersey case against the toll. Advocates for the riders have suggested that New Jersey drivers could save the toll by using NJ Transit, but that effort appears to have had little effect. NJT reports that there was no significant increase in New York ridership since toll collection began on January 5.

One bright spot so far, at least in terms of process if not yet in terms of results, is the agency's new "Customer Advocate." He is Franck Beaumin, a Frenchman who came from Paris, a city where the local transit is known worldwide for its excellence. He came to the agency from the "T" in Boston, and he has met with the Lackawanna Coalition and other advocates, the agency's three advisory committees, and with its Board members. How effective he can be toward improving mobility for the agency's customers in a politically-charged environment and with hostility from Washington on its way remains to be seen but, so far, he is making the best effort that any manager has made to interact with riders and their advocates in decades, and he deserves credit for that effort.

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

## NEWS FROM VIRGINIA AND THE CAROLINAS

By Martin Wheeler

### VIRGINIA NEWS:

"Electrification of the S line high speed passenger rail project between Richmond and Raleigh may get a look," according to D. J. Stadler, Executive Director of the Virginia Rail Passenger Authority, who further suggested that the idea would be visited when the S line project gets to 50 percent design. Stadler also indicates dual mode locomotives will be coming in 2027, which will aid in deciding the final propulsion scenario for the train service. Regardless, the carbon footprint of the service would be starkly less than the use of current locomotives.

Stadler says a number of S line grants have been awarded to Virginia. 11 of the grants will be implemented by CSX, and 3 by the VPRRA. The grants have been awarded, but monies not yet obligated. A list of all the projects are on the Virginia Rail Passenger Authority website, [vapassengerrailauthority.org](http://vapassengerrailauthority.org)

Virginia now has 8 state-supported Amtrak routes and plans on 13 round trips after completion of the Long Bridge project across the Potomac River. Ridership on Virginia trains is up 23 percent for December over the previous year figures. Virginia's ridership growth is closely paralleling that experienced in North Carolina with NC By Train services (*Carolinian* and *Piedmont*.)

VRPA's latest major initiatives include the Long Bridge rail project over the Potomac River, and expansion of service in New River Valley. Long Bridge will provide two dedicated rail passenger tracks at a cost of \$2.3 billion, with completion in 2030. The New River service expansion west of Roanoke would begin with service to Blacksburg via N&W tracks. This route is also part of the highest-rated long distance route expansion in the FRA Amtrak long distance study. Additional service expansion in western Virginia might

include running an in-state *Cardinal* service when the tri-weekly train doesn't run. Stadler says consideration of this probably wouldn't happen until 2027, and there are ongoing efforts to make the *Cardinal* a daily service between Washington and Chicago.

### SOUTH CAROLINA NEWS:

#### *Charlotte-Columbia and Columbia-Raleigh*

#### SOUTH CAROLINA RAIL PLAN RECOMMENDS TWO CORRIDOR ID STUDIES FOR THE PALMETTO STATE

The recently completed South Carolina Rail plan recommends two Federal Corridor ID studies be conducted by the South Carolina Department of Transportation for new inter-city rail passenger services. One study for Columbia to Charlotte would provide conceptual level capital and operating costs, and a range of ridership and revenue projections associated with new service connecting Columbia with Charlotte. The second study for Columbia to Raleigh would use the same parameters associated with new service connecting Columbia with Raleigh. This study would mesh well with the ongoing development of the Richmond to Raleigh higher speed rail project by North Carolina in cooperation with Virginia. The studies could be applied for by the Council of Governments if SC DOT shows no interest in pursuing them. The next round of national corridor study awards are expected late in 2025.

While the Federal Railroad Administration's Amtrak Long Distance study has been basically completed, the plan suggests continued monitoring and cooperation in the event of possible alterations to the study results. 15 Amtrak distance routes were selected, but the Carolinas gained no new additional long-distance services. The Carolinas Association for Passenger Trains had pushed for a Midwest to Carolinas service that might split in Asheville serving Columbia and Charleston, and Charlotte and Wilmington.

Also recommended is a focus on the Charlotte-to-Atlanta High Speed Rail Corridor plan now continuing under the direction of the North Carolina Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration. The proposed corridor would provide new service on a new high-speed rail alignment between Charlotte, NC, and Atlanta, GA, with potential intermediate stops including Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport in South Carolina and Athens, GA, then serving a downtown Atlanta station and terminating at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, the world's busiest airport. The projected May 2026 Atlanta-Charlotte Tier 2 Environmental Impact Statement is a follow-up to FRA's 2021 Record of Decision on the Tier 1 Final EIS. The Tier 2 EIS includes an examination of propulsion technology, more detailed information about alignment, station locations, airport interchanges, and plans for service development.

It should be noted that expansion of new rail passenger services in South Carolina could involve use of freeway right of way which has been done in Florida and Nevada for Brightline projects. Brightline has already expressed interest in the Charlotte-Atlanta corridor. Legislation was proposed in the last session of the South Carolina General Assembly on how the state might be involved and benefit from use of freeway right of way for rail operations.

#### COLUMBIA RAILROAD GRADE SEPARATION MOVING FORWARD

Federal funding has been confirmed for the Assembly Street railroad grade separation in Columbia near historic Union Station. \$204 million from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law will allow consolidation of Norfolk Southern and CSX rights of way in the area. A bridge will carry vehicular traffic over the

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## NEWS FROM VIRGINIA AND THE CAROLINAS

### *Continued from page 8*

consolidated rail corridor reducing traffic congestion and increasing safety along the busy road. The north-south NS line will continue to cross Assembly Street at grade with modifications. The City of Columbia, Richland County, and the South Carolina Department of Transportation will fund the 20 percent nonfederal match of the projected \$275-300 million project. The favored alignment for the project will not preclude the addition of some track connections that might be needed for possible use of Union Station as a new multi-modal transportation center for Columbia. The current Amtrak station is on Pulaski Street south of the University of South Carolina in a modular building said to be a temporary solution when a previous railroad consolidation project was completed in the 1990s. Discussions over the years have centered on a more permanent structure or possible relocation.

### **NORTH CAROLINA NEWS:**

#### ***Charlotte Red Line commuter/regional rail update:***

The Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) is proposing 4 scenarios for building out the proposed 30-year transit plan. If approved, it would fund transportation projects totaling 19 billion dollars over the next 30 years. Senate Bill 145 would provide for transit and road funding and would increase the county sales tax by one cent to 8.25 percent. The 30-year plan would also need \$5 billion in additional federal matching funds. The measure may go before Mecklenburg County voters in a sales tax referendum in November. The referendum date is contingent upon approval by the North Carolina General Assembly of a one-cent sales tax.

The legislation filed by State Senator Vicki Sawyer ( Mecklenburg-Iredell ) also calls for the creation of a transit authority to oversee transit in Charlotte and the greater region. A proposal for

make-up of the authority has been discussed but was not included in Senate Bill 145. The text of the bill may be viewed through the link below:

<https://webservices.ncleg.gov/ViewBillDocument/2025/709/0/DRS45067-MCxf-78>

The General Assembly has a very heavy agenda due to Hurricane Helene recovery which includes a \$20 million request for assistance in rebuilding a section of the Norfolk Southern Railroad near Old Fort. The railroad would fund the remaining \$40 million needed for the repairs.

The one-cent sales tax would begin in July of 2026 if the referendum is passed in November of 2025, and would have no expiration date. The current one-half-cent sales tax dedicated exclusively to transit will continue and not sunset. The transit plan would dedicate 40 percent to rail, 20 percent to bus, and 40 percent to road construction to municipalities in Mecklenburg County. Initially the plan would only cover Mecklenburg County, but other counties would have the option of joining the regional authority. The four scenarios which are financially constrained include one more focused on rail, another with some rail, and 2 others generally substituting bus for formerly conceived rail projects. Originally the plan was heavily focused on rail but had to be revamped when state legislators objected to lack of road funding in the proposal. At present no county in North Carolina has a sales tax dedicated to roads. The mechanism has been used by various counties in South Carolina.

Scenario number 1 is most favorable to rail projects. It includes full funding (\$1.38 billion) for the Red Line commuter/regional rail project between Charlotte and Iredell County, building a section of the Silver Line light rail from I-485/Airport to Ovens Auditorium/Bojangles Arena east of center city, east and west Gold Line Streetcar extensions, a Blue Line extension to Pineville, and lengthening 11 platforms to 3 car length on the Blue Line between Center City and I-485 station. The 11 stations affected can now only handle 2-car

trains. Sections of the Silver Line, and Blue Line extension to Ballantyne would be served by enhanced bus services until rail can be added later. Scenario 2 would substitute permanent bus rapid transit for some sections of the light rail lines, and Scenarios 3 and 4 substitute bus for large portions of the transit plan. Red Line commuter/regional rail is the only rail project that remains constant in all 4 scenarios. Fifty percent of the Red Line must be completed before completion of any other rail project in all scenarios. Charlotte's 30-year transit plan is estimated to cost \$25.3 billion. This includes \$19.4 billion from a 1% sales tax increase in Mecklenburg County and \$5.9 billion in federal grants. The Metropolitan Transit Commission or the Regional Transportation Authority replacing it would make decisions on what projects would be funded.

Matthews Mayor John Higdon says the town still opposes the plan since it does not include light rail from the Charlotte center city to the town of Matthews which had been part of the original plan adopted about ten years ago. Higdon says the plan needs to be fair and equitable and serve all areas of the county.

Numerous public meetings will be held over the next six months by CATS. Some towns are also electing to do separate awareness meetings for their constituents. The town of Davidson held meetings in February on the Red Line. Davidson Town Council will be recommending a station site for the Red Line in March. Three sites are in consideration with the most likely choice being town-owned property at the corner of Jackson and Griffith Streets, one block north of the historic railroad station.

The Red Line commuter/regional rail project is expected to take 8-10 years to complete, with 42 trains a day, and service weekdays and weekends. Heavier service would be during morning and afternoon rush weekdays, but midday and evening service would also be included.

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## NEWS FROM VIRGINIA AND THE CAROLINAS

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### \$14 MILLION AWARDED FOR UPGRADE TO CAFE SERVICE ON THE PIEDMONT

The grant awarded by the Federal Railroad Administration will enhance the current food services provided by vending machines. The Amtrak Piedmont service now consists of four roundtrips daily from Charlotte to Raleigh, with a fifth expected within 2 years. . Restoration & Enhancement funding would support six years of service, and North Carolina DOT will provide the non-federal match. No time frame mentioned yet for start of service.

Wake Forest has received a \$13.2 million federal grant to help it build a station downtown. The grant is to the NC DOT Rail Division, which pays Amtrak to run Piedmont trains between Raleigh and Charlotte. NC DOT hopes to extend Piedmont service to Wake Forest starting in 2030. In late 2024, the federal government pledged nearly \$1.1 billion to help the state upgrade the former Seaboard Air Line corridor (known as the "S-Line" and currently owned by CSX) between downtown Raleigh and Wake Forest, including new track and several bridges to eliminate at-grade crossings.

A recently announced NC By Train Service Expansion outreach campaign is expected to launch online later this month. During the month of April, the NCDOT Rail Division will be gathering further input through open house public meetings and events at various venues. The effort will focus on the entire corridor between Charlotte and Raleigh, looking at where service is provided now and what it will look like in the future. Cities which are currently skipped by Piedmont trains 71 and 76 are expected to have separate public hearings to be informed of plans going forward with the opportunity offer views on skip-stop scenarios. Those meetings

would occur in May, with other meetings continuing until mid-July. In the coming years, another daily round trip is planned to connect Raleigh and Charlotte, when new equipment arrives. Additional cities in the Piedmont corridor are making significant investment in new stations (Lexington, Harrisburg, and Hillsborough). It's unclear when those stops might be added. Movement has slowed considerably due to liability issues.

*Martin Wheeler is a RUN Board member and President, Carolinas Association for Passenger Trains.*

## NOTES FROM NEW YORK

*Continued from page 3*

they want the cameras turned off! The MTA had expected something like this, and immediately filed a lawsuit challenging the move by the Feds. They argued that the program was well within the boundaries of the federal pilot program that had allowed it to begin. They also argued that only the recipient of the program can unilaterally rescind the agreement. As it turns out, the Feds had a date in mind to permanently shut down the program: March 21, 2025!

The battle over congestion pricing, which the MTA is counting on to fund billions of dollars in major upgrades to the system, is expected to play out in federal court. Fortunately, the judge who will hear the first argument is one who has already ruled favorably 4 times in various lawsuits against the program - Judge Lewis Liman. While legal experts say the March deadline is not binding, some question whether President Trump might resort to other tactics, such as withholding federal transit funds for other projects, as an additional means of applying pressure. In a letter sent last week by Gloria Shepherd, executive director of the Federal Highway Administration, the MTA was instructed to cease collection of tolls by March 21. She also stated that they would work with the MTA to provide the necessary

details and updates for a proper cessation of the program. In response, the MTA vowed to keep collecting the tolls unless a federal judge instructs them to cease. "We're not turning them off," stated Janno Lieber, the MTA's CEO & Chair.

Interestingly, one of the Trump Administrations complaints about congestion pricing was that it would be bad for New York's businesses, including Broadway Theatres. Last week, New York's Governor Hochul met with the President to describe the many benefits congestion pricing has brought to the city, including rising attendance at Broadway Theatres, more foot traffic for businesses, and a large increase in commercial office leasing. The tolling program has already raised nearly \$49 million in its first month! Many are telling the MTA to keep the cameras on, including Sarah M. Kaufman, director of the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management at New York University, who supports the tolling plan. She said "at this point, the longer the cameras stay on, the more positive data we're seeing. There's just one positive impact after another and that will likely continue." Marc Molinaro, a former Republican congressman from New York and a frequent critic of congestion pricing, is expected to head the Federal Transit Administration, an agency that distributes billions of dollar a year to transit projects. Some expect his office could delay reimbursing New York for major capital projects in a bid to force the end of the program.

All this is extremely ironic, as for the federal government to interfere with state-run initiatives seems counter to normal "states' rights" views held by those now in power.

Congestion Pricing is extremely important for the MTA and the millions of people who use it every day, as well as to those who never set foot on our amazing system! Over 80% of those

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## SAVE THE DATE FOR RUN'S 2025 SPRING VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

*Continued from page 1*

Department of Transportation, will talk about the Purple Line Project, which will provide light rail service from Bethesda to New Carrollton with direct connections to Metrorail, Amtrak, MARC commuter rail, and bus networks.

Jean Fox, the Director of Outreach for the MBTA Transportation Authority's South Coast Rail Project, will talk about restoring passenger rail service to Fall River and New Bedford, MA.

Dee Leggett, Executive Vice President / Chief Development Officer at DART, will talk about DART's Silver Line Regional Rail Project, which is a 26-mile regional rail service that traverses seven cities – Grapevine, Coppell, Dallas, Carrollton, Addison, Richardson and Plano – with a final connection at DFW Airport.

Brian Nadolny, AICP, Project Manager at Charlotte Area Transit system, will talk about the Red Line, which is a 25-mile commuter rail project using the existing Norfolk Southern rail line. This new line will provide a regional connection between Uptown Charlotte and the downtowns of Huntersville, Cornelius and Davidson, with potential to extend into Mt. Mourne in Mooresville.

RUN Board member David Peter Alan, chair emeritus of the Lackawanna Coalition, will deliver closing remarks.

Each speaker will have up to 30 minutes to talk about their state's projects, which includes five minutes for Q&A.

Who should attend? The conference is designed not only for passenger rail / transit 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 nonmembers is \$25, which

includes RUN membership through 2025.

Be sure to register by May 2, so that we can send along the info needed to attend RUN's Virtual Spring Conference. To register, please go to our website to register at conference / or use the QR code below.

All people registering online will receive an acknowledgement from the system, but it may be directed to your junk or spam folder, which we cannot control. Please check there for your registration acknowledgement.

We look forward to your participation. In the meantime, be well and enjoy the coming of Spring and many thanks for all you do to support and improve passenger rail/ rail transit.

## MBTA SOUTH COAST RAIL TO OPEN IN MARCH 2025

*Continued from page 2*

midnight. Adjustments to the last train's schedules may vary for special events in Boston including major late-night sports events in the city.

When the new service begins, the current Middleborough/Lakeville Line will be renamed the Fall River/New Bedford Line. The Middleborough/ Lakeville Station (located at 125 Commercial Drive, Lakeville) will be renamed Lakeville Station. As a result of the new alignment, regular commuter rail trains will no longer stop at Lakeville Station. This station is currently easily accessible from highway Rt. 495, but new stations will have similar highway accessibility, especially the one at East Taunton.

Moving forward, the Lakeville Station will serve only the seasonal "Cape Cod Flyer" which runs weekends from approximately Memorial Day to Labor Day with occasional extended service through Columbus Day in October. The "Flyer" is currently a seasonal tourist service but an extension of this line for regular commuter service as far south as the town of Buzzards Bay located right

on the Cape Cod Canal, is being studied. The MBTA has determined that the fare structure for all South Coast Rail stations will be priced in Zone 8. This means that passengers will pay a full fare of \$12.25 and a reduced fare (seniors, physically challenged, low-income, students) of \$6.00. The MBTA's current \$10 weekend all-ride pass is expected to also be available.

Due to the expansion, and a very real need for real estate for trains storage when not in use, three layover facilities have also been created. The Middleborough Layover will be near CSX Pilgrim Junction on the Middleborough Secondary branch; at Weavers Cove on the Fall River Secondary branch; and at Wamsutta on the New Bedford Main Line.

Diesel-powered trainsets, standard at this time for the MBTA, will be used in push-pull configuration.

At the time this article was written, the line had not been opened as yet and no schedules had been released. Local rail enthusiasts are already lining up their personal schedules to ride on opening day.

As always, we recommend checking with the MBTA website for any potential delays or schedule interruptions at [www.mbta.com](http://www.mbta.com).

*Dennis Kirkpatrick has been a RUN Board member for several years. With his MBTA application and a decent map service on his phone, he can get pretty much anywhere that transit and rail serves. He's pretty good at buses as well.*

**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!

## ADVOCATES CAN'T COUNT ON POLITICIANS TO KEEP AMTRAK AND RAIL TRANSIT GOING, AND MUST KEEP FIGHTING

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running 5 to 10 minutes apart) again in 2008 and never restored since. Nonetheless, that experience got me involved with the Essex County Transportation Advisory Board, where I served as Chair from 1998 until 2003. After that, I joined other organizations, including RUN, where I have been a Board member for the past 20 years.

During that time, I have ridden all of Amtrak and rail transit in the United States (and almost everything in Canada, too), and I have seen several administrations in Washington come and go. There seems to be little doubt that the new one that just took office will be the worst ever for Amtrak trains and for transit, if recent pronouncements and orders from USDOT Secretary Sean Duffy are any indication. He has expressed a preference for places with high marriage rates and families with children, which means highways for less-urbanized areas, instead of transit for cities, because many single people move to cities to start their adult lives and careers, and some move to less-urban areas to raise a family. That does not bode well for transit, especially in light of the fiscal cliff that hit the industry since the COVID-19 virus struck five years ago. Costs of providing service keep increasing, while ridership has not recovered to pre-COVID levels; especially at peak-commuting hours, when it costs the most to serve riders. We at RUN believe that good transit is still necessary, exemplified by Vice-Chair Andrew Albert's often-repeated statement that "The subways are the economic engine that drives New York." It's also like that in other cities with major transit

systems that include rail lines. In his order revoking USDOT support for the Congestion Pricing toll in Manhattan, Duffy complained that the money motorists spend to pay the toll is not going to highways, but to transit. A socialist interpretation of his expressed attitude would say that he is promoting class warfare between "entitled" motorists and "proletarian" transit riders but, even without going that far politically, it is clear that the new administration apparently does not intend to act favorably toward transit.

### ***Don't Count on the Dems***

Many advocates seem to cast the Democrats as the "Great Hope" for saving our Amtrak trains and our transit, at least when they have the power to do so. Generally speaking, they are less-hostile to passenger transportation on rails than Republicans are, but relying on them to battle fiercely against Republicans and save our non-automobile mobility appears to be a hope not justified by recent history.

On the transit front, rail transit seems to have done better under Democrats than under Republicans, but not significantly so. New starts have not been plentiful during the past half-century, although several cities built light rail systems, and a few built single streetcar or light rail lines, during the 1980s and 1990s, when the parties in power in Washington flipped back and forth. During the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, new rail starts have slowed to a trickle, as less than 40% of the applications to the Federal Transit Administration for new starts or extensions of transit call for new rail projects. The other 60% (actually slightly more: 39 out of 64 last year) were for busways, rather than rail lines.

The Biden administration was more favorable to transit than others, but that happened because of the emergency that resulted from the COVID-19 virus. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act

(IIJA, also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, BIL) got capital projects started, but we don't know how many of those will actually be finished, especially with the Trump/Musk cutting spree now decimating the federal government and made worse for rail with Elon Musk in the automobile business.

The one big break that the Democrats have brought to transit was the COVID relief legislation that offered support for the operating side of transit, as well as to the capital side, and which kept many of the nation's systems going through the worst of the pandemic. Today, though, that money is running out, and there will not be anything similar coming to replace it. So transit providers are on their own to keep going, with whatever help they can get from states, along with counties, municipalities and the private sector. That is the "fiscal cliff" that is challenging the continued existence of mobility for those of us who depend on transit, as well as the transit option for motorists who choose to use it. Last summer, I examined the challenges in detail for a 12-part series in *Railway Age*. All of the major transit systems with rail components are in trouble to varying degrees, and it will be difficult for many of them to survive the next four years while continuing to offer service anywhere near the level they offer now.

On the Amtrak side, Republican administrations have always been hostile to Amtrak, and this one might be the most-hostile yet. To make matters worse, "America's Railroad" has suffered more under Democrats than under Republicans, starting with Jimmy Carter, the first Democrat to occupy the office after Amtrak was founded in 1971.

Amtrak's long-distance network was always skeletal, starting with only 14 routes. Today there are only 13 that are available to motorists and non-motorists alike. A passenger without a vehicle cannot buy a ticket to ride the Auto-train, which was the only long-distance

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## ADVOCATES CAN'T COUNT ON POLITICIANS TO KEEP AMTRAK AND RAIL TRANSIT GOING, AND MUST KEEP FIGHTING

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train that ran every day during the COVID era. That train's basic ticketing unit is a "car and driver." The network grew somewhat during Amtrak's first eight years, but six trains were discontinued in 1979. Except for one segment of the old *Texas Chief* (later the *Lone Star Limited*) route, between Fort Worth and Oklahoma City, no passenger train ever returned to any of the route-miles that were lost during the Carter administration. No Amtrak long-distance trains that started running after 1979 still run in their original form, and most are gone.

The infamous "Mercer" cuts of the 1990s (named after the consulting firm that recommended them) eliminated several corridor-length routes and reduced many long-distance trains to operating only three or four times a week, occurred when Bill Clinton was president, although all but two of the long-distance routes were restored to daily service later. Those two were discontinued.

The Obama-era initiatives to start new corridor trains were well-intentioned, but did not get anywhere, even though the overarching reason for that was because Republican governors refused to accept the federal funds offered to help pay for the new starts in Florida, Wisconsin, and Ohio.

More recently, when "Amtrak Joe" Biden was president, the entire long-distance Amtrak network was reduced to tri-weekly operation (except in Florida, where the *Silver Meteor* was suspended during that period and the now-defunct *Silver Star* ran every day). Otherwise, only the Auto-train still ran

daily. That train was, and today remains, off-limits to non-motorists who are not guests of the motorist who bought the ticket and paid the fare that included transportation for his or her vehicle.

There has been significant growth on the corridor side of Amtrak from the mid-1970s until the early years of this century, although much of that growth can be attributed to state governments working with Amtrak to establish those routes. States like Illinois and California were especially strong in developing corridors within their borders, and other states have done the same. Those starts appear to have had more to do with who was holding office in the states than who was holding office nationally.

### *What's happening now*

Times have always been challenging for advocates who fight for more trains and improvements in rail transit. The next several years will probably bring more-difficult challenges than trains, transit, and their advocates have ever faced before. While previous administrations, both Republicans and Democrats, have shown varying degrees of hostility toward transportation that is available to both motorists and non-motorists (except for airline travel), the new administration is augmenting that traditional hostility with a broadly-based zeal to get rid of as much of the public sector as possible. While it claims to be a private corporation (and is chartered that way by the Rail Passenger Service Act of 1970), Amtrak has been treated and funded like a public-sector entity since its inception. Transit is in the public sector, too, so it appears that both are on the chopping block.

There are a few new starts coming that were almost completed before the current administration took office, like South Coast Rail between Boston on one end and New Bedford and Fall River on the other, but there are only a few of those. There appears to be some likelihood that most or all of the others, even California's High-Speed Rail project, could be halted and canceled.

On February 21, *Railway Age* Editor-in-Chief William C. Vantuono reported that a USDOT official had sent notice to California High-Speed Rail (CAHSR) management that the Department is conducting a thorough review of the project to determine whether or not it should be allowed to continue receiving federal funding, because of the long-delays and severe cost increases that the project has faced over the years. Will this mean the end for the project? Time will tell, but USDOT is certainly skeptical about it. If the feds terminate their involvement in the project, would that send a strong signal through the rest of the industry? There seems to be no doubt that it would.

### *So what can advocates do?*

Speaking from 40 years of advocacy experience (although today, most of my association with the advocacy movement is to keep my contacts there, so I can report about advocates' activities), I am aware that advocates occupy a weak position. I would never suggest that advocates give up, but there seems to be no reasonable expectation of positive results in the short run. As I mentioned earlier in this article, the Democrats do not offer a panacea for enhancing the nation's passenger train network, but they do not hold positions as unfavorable as Republicans generally do, especially regarding transit. At the national level, the Democrats might have a shot at retaking the house in 2026, because the party out of power often makes gains in Congress in the "off-year" elections. The Senate will be much more difficult, because the map favors Republicans next year. Some advocates hope that POTUS 47 will become sufficiently unpopular with voters that his approval ratings will plummet, but such hopes are nothing more than unfounded speculation about an administration in office for only two months, so far.

So it would make sense for advocates to concentrate on state and local governments, where local issues are

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## PHILADELPHIA NEWS

By Chuck Bode

SEPTA changed the designations of several routes, including all transit rail routes, on February 23 and 24. To add to the confusion, two of the designations switched from bus to rail routes.

| Old designation | New designation |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| G               | 63              |
| H               | 71              |
| J               | 41              |
| L               | 51              |
| R               | 82              |
| XH              | 81              |
| 10              | T1              |
| 11              | T4              |
| 13              | T3              |
| 15              | G               |
| 34              | T2              |
| 36              | T5              |
| 101             | D1              |
| 102             | D2              |
| BSS             | B               |
| NHSL            | M               |
| MFSE            | L               |

### SEPTA prepares for the fiscal cliff

Last year, SEPTA narrowly escaped the fiscal cliff when the Governor flexed highway funds to keep SEPTA operating. This year SEPTA does not expect a repeat. Therefore, it has announced this year it is preparing a doomsday budget that will result in a death spiral. A 20% cut in service and a 21% fare hike are both included. News reports indicate that SEPTA expects the riders lost will be permanent and would not return if service is eventually restored.

*Chuck Bode is a Board member, Treasurer and Membership Secretary of RUN and member of the Tri-State Citizens' Council on Transportation.*

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## ADVOCATES CAN'T COUNT ON POLITICIANS TO KEEP AMTRAK AND RAIL TRANSIT GOING, AND MUST KEEP FIGHTING

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important, and elected officials at those levels might be receptive to improving local transit and trains that run within the state (or into an adjacent state), if the state can afford to fund them.

As far as arguments are concerned, any mention to Republicans of arguments like "social equity and justice" and "environmental benefits" are effectively off-limits. It is now official policy that the federal government no longer tolerates discussion of concepts like "diversity" and "climate change" and has deleted them from agency publications and websites. In short, Republicans don't want to hear it, and would probably not listen to anything else that advocates might want to tell them. Democrats might still care about those benefits that trains and transit can deliver, but that's a different situation.

There is still one winning argument, as I mention often in commentaries and statements that I deliver. That is the "business case" that points out the economic return for the state or for a community from investment in trains or transit, particularly rail transit. Bringing more money to the local economy is one of the few results that everybody wants, whether Democrats, Republicans, or community residents who do not have any official status. Even the most-progressive officials will not dismiss out of hand an idea that will improve the local economy, perhaps unless it would harm the environment or the health or safety of local residents. As has been demonstrated in city after city and on route after route where passenger trains run, more trains and

better transit do not cause harm to either. To the contrary, they help people get to their jobs and other activities in a safe and pleasant manner.

So, as a journalist on the rail and transit beat, and as an "elder statesman" in the advocacy community (as are most of the members of the RUN Board), I encourage all advocates to KEEP FIGHTING for more trains and better transit. These are hard times for our mobility, but the situation may improve someday. The less we do, even during these challenging times, the less likely it is that the improvements for which we all hope will ever come. The more we do, the better the chances that our trains and transit, along with much else in the country, will weather the challenges that lie ahead. More than ever, this is the time for all advocates to fight as hard as possible, while looking toward the future.

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

## NOTES FROM NEW YORK

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entering the congestion zone enter by mass transit - not only from the east but also from New Jersey. If the federal government can just terminate state-run programs it doesn't like, who and which program could be next? Will the Feds provide the \$15 billion annually that congestion pricing is expected to raise? Or will they just let New York's massive transportation infrastructure deteriorate? Our transit system is the economic engine of our city, which is the economic engine of the state, which is the economic engine of the nation! We cannot -and will not-allow it to deteriorate, which would be an economic disaster for everyone!

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

# THE NORTHERN TIER RAIL PROJECT

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

Over the past decade, a lot has happened regarding the expansion of passenger rail and rail transit services in Massachusetts: the MBTA Green line expansion to Somerville and Medford, the Valley Flyer train service from Greenfield, MA to Springfield and New Haven, CT and the new passenger rail service from South Station, Boston to New Bedford and Fall River. There is also the ongoing effort to expand passenger rail service from Boston to Springfield, Pittsfield and possibly onto Albany, NY. Given the above, it isn't surprising that community, education and business leaders believe it is high time that North Western Massachusetts get some of the transportation infrastructure money being spent primarily in the eastern part of the state. The focus is on "full local service" which is one of the six service scenarios described in the recently completed Northern Tier Passenger Rail study. This included the restoration of rail service from North Adams, MA to Greenfield and Boston.

The Northern Tier Rail Project would restore passenger rail service along a 140-mile line that was once a major east-west travel route through Massachusetts. Originally known as the Fitchburg Railroad, the rail line was first established in 1842 connecting Boston to Fitchburg. It was then extended to North Adams in 1848 and with the construction of the 4 1/2-mile Hoosac Tunnel. This took nearly 25 years to be built and finally reached Troy, NY in 1875. The line played a vital role in the growth and development of North Adams. Passenger service was provided between Troy, North Adams and Boston until the late 1950s.

Currently, the Northern Tier rail corridor is used for freight service with no regular passenger service offered west of Fitchburg, MA. Until 1986, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, which owns and operates

portions of the corridor, had previously operated services as far west as Gardiner. It currently only provides commuter rail service between North Station, Boston and Fitchburg Massachusetts. Although there had been some expression of interest in restoring passenger service west of Fitchburg over the past several decades, the idea really didn't take off until Senator Jo Comerford introduced a bill in 2019 directing Mass DOT to examine the benefits, costs and investments required to implement passenger rail service from North Adams to Greenfield and Boston. Recognizing that other lawmakers were working on a study for commuter rail from Pittsfield to Springfield to Boston, she suggested that MassDOT wait on her proposed study until July 1, 2020, after the other study was concluded. Her bill was ultimately passed by both houses of the legislature and included in the 2019 Transportation bond bill. This legislation instructed MassDOT to conduct a comprehensive study of passenger rail service to evaluate the feasibility of passenger rail service between Boston, Greenfield and North Adams.

Following the directive from the 2019 Transportation Bond Bill, the Office of Transportation planning within MassDOT finally launched an official study in fiscal year 2020. Under contract to the state, the HNTB Corporation was hired to examine and evaluate the costs and economic opportunities related to establishing passenger service along the northern tier of Massachusetts. The final report, which was released last November 27, examined six different options for rail service from North Adams to Boston. This would require anywhere between \$878 million and \$2.9 billion in investments.

This conceptual planning study established three overarching goals for the study which would develop and assess six options for rail service along the corridor. The goals included support for economic development along the Northern Tier Corridor, transportation equity and minimal impact on public health and the environment. Given that public participation was deemed critical

in refining the study's goals and objectives as well as to determine criteria for evaluating the six different alternatives, four meetings were held with a stakeholder working group consisting of federal, state, regional and local representatives. Three public information meetings and a public workshop were also held.

Using a two-phase planning process, the planning first involved identifying two different service alternatives representing lower and higher investment scenarios. With feedback from the working group and the public, the two initial service alternatives were refined and four additional alternatives were developed and assessed as part of Phase 2. Each of these alternatives would provide five round trips per day, seven days a week and would utilize coaches similar to those on the Valley Flyer service. All alternatives use diesel locomotives except for Alternative 3, which would use electrified locomotives. Alternatives 3, 4, and 5 would provide a one-seat ride on five round trips per day serving a variety of trip purposes. Alternative 6 requires a transfer between the Northern Tier and MBTA Commuter Rail services in Fitchburg. The infrastructure improvements between Fitchburg and North Adams are comparable in magnitude and impact but vary by location. Stations also vary for all Phase 2 alternatives. A North Adams layover is included in all alternatives except Alternative 5, which would provide service to Albany.

Alternative 3, the most expensive option, includes electrification of the right-of-way between Fitchburg and North Adams with an overhead catenary system and associated power substations. This alternative assumes that electrification from Fitchburg east would be completed by the MBTA. It would include station stops at North Adams, Greenfield, Athol, Fitchburg, Ayer, Porter and North Station. Other infrastructure improvements would include a new double track in

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## THE NORTHERN TIER RAIL PROJECT

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Charlemont. Travel time from North Adams to Boston would be 2 hours and 50 minutes. The electrified service option scored the highest annual ridership estimate of the various plans, drawing 196,529 to 304,200 riders annually.

Alternative 4: Full Local Service would add stops at Shelburne Falls, Athol, Gardiner and would include more stops on the line in places like Charlemont and Williamstown, home of Williams College. It would annually draw between 168,040 and 255,460 riders.

Alternative 5 - Albany Extension: This service would start in Albany/Rensselaer, NY with stops in Schenectady, North Adams, Greenfield, Fitchburg and Porter. The schedule would be designed for transfers to other rail services at Albany/Rensselaer. Travel time from Albany to Boston North Station would be 4 hours and 34 minutes. Equipment for this service would layover at the existing Amtrak facility in Rensselaer.

Even before Mass DOT issued its final report on November 27, 2024, there was pushback regarding findings in the draft report which was published earlier. Senator Comerford, along with three other state senators and five representatives, issued a letter for "Supporting Restart of Northern Tier Passenger Rail." They pointed out that the "project has ignited an urgent hope along the Route 2 corridor in struggling communities too long ignored and undervalued by state government." They stated that there "is a strong, shared belief that restarting Northern Tier Passenger Rail service will strengthen our municipal and regional economies, increase viable transportation access and relieve traffic burdens along Route 2 and other west/east routes for the region, arrest debilitating population decline, and help protect our environment."

The draft report concluded that more work would be needed to further develop the markets, ridership, costs and benefits from

a transportation planning perspective. "Based on current demographic and economic trends, much of the projected ridership is concentrated east of Fitchburg. Given the estimated benefits and costs associated with each of the six alternatives, the benefit-cost analysis indicates that benefits may not offset the capital costs required for implementation."

The report also outlined additional steps that should be taken. "Due to the timeline for implementing any passenger rail service corridor, mobility improvements should be explored that could provide connectivity in the shorter term such as examining motor coach service as an interim, lower-cost." The creation of a coordinated economic development strategy for the Central and Western sections of the Northern Tier would provide a platform to realize sustainable economic growth in the region by leveraging investment in intercity public transportation. The study also mentioned the possibility for connections to the wider region by linking it with train service to Vermont and Connecticut through scheduled connections to Amtrak's *Vermont* which currently stops in Greenfield, MA.

The draft report didn't draw any conclusion for or against the merits of the overall project, but it certainly has aroused opposition. Given the history of protest in Western Massachusetts dating back as far as 1786-87 Shay's Rebellion, it is not at all surprising that passenger rail advocates would hold protests on Monday, November 18, in North Adams and at the Oliver Transit Center in Greenfield to build momentum to "Bring back the Train" and for "full local service" even before the final report was published on November 27. The rallies coincided with the release of a letter for support signed by 100 organizations, municipalities and elected officials from the region. "The list of supporters includes banks, cultural venues, medical centers and hospitals, museums, and Chambers of Commerce, higher education institutions and economic development agencies."

John Barrett III, who represents the 1st Berkshire District in Massachusetts State Legislature, spoke at North Adams City Hall

and said there were elements of the draft plan that he didn't like including that the cost might not justify the effort. He pointed out that the state sales tax was sending \$1.4 billion to the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority every year and said "We want the same amount of money up here. We only want it once; if we get close to that, it will be enough to get this railroad started within a year or two." That's how quickly it can happen, he said. "But we have to have equity and the only way we're going to have equity is your voice."

Ben Heckscher, the co-founder of **Trains in the Valley**, has been advocating for passenger rail restoration in Western Mass and the Pioneer Valley since 2016. He reminded folks at the rally that "the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission did a study in 2009 to extend rail from Springfield to Greenfield and it was up and running six years later even though the track was in worse shape than the Northern Tier." He said, "We can do this now. We can move this forward, and we just need to find the momentum to keep this moving and to get the governor's support." Heckscher doesn't believe it all has to be done now and spent all at once. "Changes can also be made incrementally by doing the more basic steps to start the service and making additional upgrades and improvements over time."

In closing, rail advocates are continuing the fight to restore passenger rail service along the Northern Tier Route. At a brief meeting hosted by Congressman Jim McGovern at the Oliver Transit Center on February 28, 2025, it was announced that MassDOT is committed to moving forward with the project. Early steps include the preparation of an application for federal funding from the FRA Corridor I.D. Program. The application will be submitted in the fall provided that the FRA reopens the grant program for new applications. This was seen as possible good news by many attendees, which included MassDOT Secretary Monica Tibbits-Nutt, Senator Comerford and Representative Barrett, but no one knows at this point where the Trump administration stands on this matter.

# THE CAMPAIGN TO RESTORE THE AMTRAK PIONEER

By Brian Yanity

## Part 1

The broadly defined Interstate 84 corridor between Utah's Wasatch Front and the Pacific Northwest has a population of 10 million people. Greater Salt Lake City and Boise are two of the fastest-growing metro areas in the U.S., with a population increase of over 50% and 80% respectively since the year 2000. At Mountain Home, ID - west of Twin Falls and east of Boise - traffic on Interstate 84 averages 20,000 vehicles per day. This is a rural area with modest local traffic, so it is safe to assume that several thousand people drive each day between the Wasatch Front and Boise, Oregon and Washington State.

The reestablishment of passenger rail service through southern Idaho and eastern Oregon would provide interregional transportation for a large rural region, and the population center of Boise. It would also link together the substantial community of interest that exists between this region and greater Salt Lake City metro area, also known as the Wasatch Front north-south urban corridor, which has a population approaching three million people. There is a large amount of commerce, family and friend connections between southern Idaho and Utah's populous Wasatch Front region, as there is between eastern Oregon and Idaho's Treasure Valley (Boise metropolitan area).

The Amtrak *Pioneer* was inaugurated in 1977, connecting Salt Lake City and Seattle via Portland and Boise. The two Union Pacific Railroad passenger trains running on its tracks between Portland and Boise in the 1960s, the *City of Portland* (to Chicago) and the *Portland Rose* (to Kansas City), were not continued by Amtrak at its creation in 1971. The *Pioneer* made stops at Ogden, Utah; Pocatello, Shoshone (Twin Falls), Boise, Nampa in Idaho; Ontario, Baker City, La Grande, Pendleton, Hinkle (Hermiston), The Dalles, and Hood River in Oregon, then continuing north through Washington on what is now the *Cascades*

corridor to Seattle. The train schedule, both ways, ran through the spectacular Columbia River Gorge during daylight hours. At Ogden, the *Pioneer* connected with the *San Francisco Zephyr* east-west transcontinental train to Chicago. New bi-level Superliner equipment allowed the train to exchange a Seattle-Chicago through coach with the *Zephyr* at Ogden in 1981, supplemented by a through sleeping car in 1982. Two stops on the initial *Pioneer* service- Mountain Home, Idaho and Brigham City, Utah- were dropped in April 1981. A stop was then initiated at Cache Junction, Utah (about 30 miles north of Brigham City and less than 15 miles from the university town of Logan), which was discontinued in 1988.

The Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad decided to join Amtrak in 1983, making available its route between Denver and Salt Lake City via the Moffat Tunnel. The *San Francisco Zephyr* was renamed the *California Zephyr* and rerouted over the Rio Grande route, moving its *Pioneer* and *Desert Wind* connections to Salt Lake City.

The *Pioneer* suffered from poor on-time performance on the Union Pacific track between Portland and Salt Lake City, usually due to slow freight trains through Oregon's rugged Blue Mountains. This often resulted in after midnight arrivals in Seattle and delays to the eastbound *Zephyr* at Salt Lake City. The late arrivals in Seattle often impacted crew rest and equipment turn times in Seattle resulting in the late departure of the eastbound *Pioneer* early the next morning. This then cascaded into the *California Zephyr* resulting in issues in Chicago.

To help remedy this, *Pioneer's* terminus and *California Zephyr* interchange point was moved again from Salt Lake City to Denver in 1991, changing the routing to Union Pacific's Overland Route in Wyoming. The reroute from Denver going north stopped at Greeley, Colorado and West Cheyenne-Borie, Laramie, Rawlins, Rock Springs, Green River, Evanston in Wyoming and then

west through Ogden. Salt Lake City was bypassed, and a bus was added to connect Utah's largest city to the *Pioneer* at Ogden. Before this 1991 reroute, the combined *California Zephyr/Desert Wind/Pioneer* typically consisted of 16 Superliner cars. This remains the longest Amtrak train has ever operated outside of Auto-Train. Amtrak reportedly required at least four EMD F40PH locomotives to haul the heavy, long 1983-1991 version of the train over the Rocky Mountains between Denver and Salt Lake City via the Moffat Tunnel. Splitting the *Pioneer* in Denver reduced the locomotive power needed between there and Salt Lake City. With fewer curves and lower gradients, the Overland Route offered faster running time and extra schedule padding. This allowed a more reasonable departure time from, and fewer late arrivals to Seattle. It also solved the eastbound *Zephyr* on-time problem of waiting for the *Pioneer* at Salt Lake City, at the cost of no longer directly serving this major population center and travel destination.

The *Pioneer* was reduced to three days a week in late 1993 due to reductions in Amtrak's federal appropriation, leading to a drastic drop in passenger numbers and revenue. Ridership statistics from the train's period of daily service in the 1980s and early 1990s, showed that annual ridership on the *Pioneer* was consistently above 100,000 riders per year, or roughly 300 per day.

In 1994, Amtrak hired Mercer Management to study how to reduce costs. Their report recommended cancellation of both the *Pioneer* and the *Desert Wind*. Further reductions in federal operating support resulted in the discontinuance of both trains in May 1997. Amtrak asked the states affected for funding support to keep the train operating, but could not come to an agreement and no state funds were provided. Eastern Oregon, southern Idaho and the entire state of Wyoming have lacked passenger train service ever since.

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## THE CAMPAIGN TO RESTORE THE AMTRAK PIONEER

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Almost all of the historic station buildings used by the Amtrak *Pioneer* are still standing, some are in public ownership, and many are in good condition, though likely would require construction of accessible platforms conforming to modern-day standards and some need restoration work. Most likely, this would require partnership with local entities and Amtrak or FRA to prepare these buildings for future service. Thus, station costs could be reasonable for a restored *Pioneer* route.

### Organized efforts to restore the *Pioneer*

Supporters living along the route of the *Pioneer* have advocated for its return ever since its cancellation. Today there is ample local political and public support for restoring passenger rail service along the corridor.

In the 2000s, the effort to bring back the service was championed by the Pioneer Restoration Organization, a coalition of communities along the route. The group's now defunct website, [www.pioneertrain.com](http://www.pioneertrain.com), boasted a list of endorsements from public officials across the West.

In 2007, Senators Ron Wyden (D-OR) and Mike Crapo (R-ID) successfully introduced Congressional legislation that required Amtrak to study restoring passenger service along the former *Pioneer* route. Both have been longtime supporters of restoring Amtrak service to eastern Oregon and southern Idaho. Amtrak's 2009 study considered four options for restoring passenger service between Seattle, Portland, Salt Lake City, and Denver, with through service to Chicago via the *California Zephyr*. Projected ridership and revenues of four scenarios evaluated were predicted to be disappointing compared to the cost,

with a farebox recovery ratio between about 20% and 30%. Total capital cost estimates for the four options studied ranged between \$370 million and \$470 million in 2009 dollars (the equivalent to ~\$600-\$700 million in 2025 dollars).

Echoing the sentiment of many of his constituents, Senator Crapo was not too pleased with the 2009 Amtrak study's conclusions, arguing in a letter to Amtrak that he felt that the estimated ridership numbers were too low considering population growth along the *Pioneer* corridor, and that it overstated the capital investment requirements and annual costs. He also wrote that comments from constituents to his office were overwhelmingly in favor of seeing the service return. In the midst of the Great Recession, Amtrak did not proceed with studying the route further.

The passage of IJA reinvigorated efforts for new long-distance trains in the Northwest. In 2021 All Aboard Northwest (<https://allaboardnw.org/>) was created as the "Greater Northwest Passenger Rail Working Group", modelled on the Gulf Coast Working Group and Southern Rail Commission in response to a request from eight US Senators. In 2022, Boise Mayor Lauren McLean and Salt Lake City Mayor Erin Mendenhall began collaboration on restoring intercity passenger rail between their two cities. Amtrak officials met with local officials in Salt Lake City, Pocatello and Boise. A September 2022 joint letter to the FRA administrator Amit Bose by over 30 Idaho public officials, including the mayors of Pocatello, Chubbuck, and Idaho Falls, supported the restoration of passenger rail service between Boise and Salt Lake City. Around the same time, the state transportation departments of Idaho, Utah and Nevada wrote a joint letter to the FRA/US DOT expressing interest in restoring passenger trains between Salt Lake City and Las Vegas, and Boise to Las Vegas. The City of Boise is hosting a Bring Back Rail campaign webpage: <https://www.cityofboise.org/programs/movement-for-everyone/bring-back-rail/>.

In September 2022, Senator Crapo, when asked about the effort to revive the *Pioneer*, told Pocatello's *Idaho State Journal*

newspaper: "Idahoans and residents of the Mountain West would benefit from exploration into providing more reliable, safe and affordable means of transportation. An intercity (passenger) rail service would add another element of healthy transportation infrastructure aimed at promoting economic growth and improving personal mobility and quality of life".

In March 2023, Idaho Transportation Department (ITD) submitted a Corridor ID (CID) application for studying Salt Lake City to Boise in collaboration with Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT), Utah Transit Authority and the City of Boise. Unfortunately, the application was erroneously submitted to the Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail Grant Program rather than CID, and was not considered in 2023 for either FRA program. In December 2024, Elaine Clegg was confirmed by the U.S. Senate to the Amtrak board. She is the CEO of Valley Regional Transit and former Chair of the Boise city council. She has long supported the restoration of interstate Amtrak passenger rail service along the *Pioneer* route across Oregon, Idaho and Utah.

The volunteer-led nonprofit Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates (AORTA) has long advocated for the revival of the Amtrak *Pioneer* line between Portland and Boise. AORTA organized the 2019 Eastern Oregon Rail Summit meeting in La Grande, and organized subsequent "roadshow" tours through eastern Oregon hosting public information events in cities once served by the *Pioneer*.

In December 2023, a small group of eastern Oregon grassroots passenger train supporters, based mostly in the towns of Baker City, Union and Halfway, upon learning that the Seattle-Denver corridor was included in the FRA Amtrak Long Distance Study, launched a petition in support of restoring passenger service along the *Pioneer* route. In one month, over 1,500 Baker County residents had signed it, or close to 10% of the county's population. Hundreds of additional signatures were garnered from citizens of neighboring Union County (whose

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## THE CAMPAIGN TO RESTORE THE AMTRAK PIONEER

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county seat La Grande was also a *Pioneer* stop). Matt Krabacher, a Baker City resident who is AORTA's Eastern Oregon Vice President said of the groundswell of community support:

"The level of support and enthusiasm out here took me very much by surprise when I got started in this. There is a large portion of Baker County residents who very clearly see how passenger rail service could benefit their lives, such as travel access and visiting family members. I grew up on the *Empire Builder* route and regularly used that line to visit my parents in my twenties, so that desire is particularly clear to me. And many of our residents are older and/or are veterans with a higher need of specialized healthcare only available in urban centers. Not to mention the ideas I've heard for full-service tourism opportunities centered around enticing people in on the train. Combine all that with the unreliable I-84 in winter and it becomes very apparent why residents of northeast Oregon see the obvious benefits that passenger rail service would bring."

At the beginning of February 2024, the petition was submitted as a comment to the FRA Amtrak Long Distance Study, and was delivered to various Oregon legislators, US Senators Wyden and Merkley, Governor Kotek's office, and ODOT officials. Within days of receiving the petition, Portland-area State Senator Chris Gorsek (and co-chair of the Oregon Rail Caucus) introduced an amendment to the 2024 transportation omnibus bill HB4109 that directed the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) to "pursue cooperative efforts with the State of Idaho to obtain assistance from the FRA to restore service on the Amtrak Pioneer Line", and to provide a report to legislators by January 2, 2025. It passed in March 2024. In addition to Senator Gorsek, other Oregon legislators such as State Senator Khanh Pham and Representative Kevin Mannix have publicly voiced support for restoration of passenger rail service along the *Pioneer* route.

AORTA and eastern Oregon rail advocates also campaigned for *Pioneer* supporters to submit comments to the FRA study, and to contact Congress. AORTA met with ODOT rail staff in July 2024, and learned that only a single conversation between Idaho and ODOT had happened in regard to a Corridor ID grant application on restoring Portland-Boise service. They were given the impression that ODOT was expecting that Idaho would just apply for the grant on their own. ODOT gave no indication that they were preparing to be co-applicants for this grant.

In late summer 2024, the Oregon State Legislature's Joint Commission on Transportation (JCT) embarked on a roadshow "listening tour", with hearings across the state, to take public opinion and input on how they should design the upcoming 2025 transportation legislation package. At the August meeting in Ontario, Elaine Clegg, now on the Amtrak board, and multiple rail advocates testified in person in favor of passenger rail returning to eastern Oregon. AORTA's Krabacher was also invited to a "closed door" round table discussion of northeast Oregon transportation stakeholders. There he met and spoke with ODOT Director Kris Strickler. In an October 2024 blog post (on <https://neoregonpassengerrail.substack.com/>), Krabacher reported that he "took the opportunity to press [Strickler] about what ODOT is doing to fulfill the [Pioneer study] legislation passed earlier this year.... He gave a relatively political non-committal answer and expressed concern that Oregon has had issues in the past being able to come up with the required matching funds for these federal grants, such as the CID."

In October 2024, the Greater Northwest Rail Summit was held in Spokane. Bre Brush, transportation advisor to the Boise mayor's office, gave a presentation on the restoration of the *Pioneer*. Krabacher of AORTA was invited to speak, along with representatives of Utah Rail Passengers Association and Montana's Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority, on a panel titled

"Town to Town: Knitting Together a Multi-State Rail Corridor". He reported:

"At that meeting I had the chance to speak with Senator Gorsek in person and encouraged him again to check in on ODOT's efforts to collaborate with Idaho. There were two big takeaways from this summit for me in regards to passenger rail. First, was that Gorsek announced publicly that he will be submitting a bill to tax tires to create a revenue stream to support passenger rail service in Oregon, as well as support salmon ecosystems in Oregon, and plans to submit this bill early next year, potentially as part of the 2025 transit package. The second thing was more abstract, which was the talk, both publicly and privately, of creating some sort of inter-state body to govern the development of rail infrastructure in the NW. OR Senator Gorsek spoke about creating a 'compact between Oregon and Washington to talk about rail operations' and also invited Idaho to get in on that and work together."

In December 2024 ODOT released a two page report to the Oregon Legislature's JCT, as obligated by HB4109. It mostly summarizes the results of the FRA Long Distance Rail Study and concerning the Seattle-Denver/*Pioneer* route, reported that ODOT had "email exchanges" with their counterparts at ITD, who "is providing technical assistance to the City of Boise which is preparing a second Boise-Salt Lake City CID application in the event there is another CID NOFO [notice of funding opportunity]". While AORTA and eastern Oregon rail supporters were disappointed that ODOT did not propose that Oregon and Idaho collaborate on a Portland-Boise CID application, these advocates will continue to advocate that ODOT make a concerted effort to work with Idaho and Utah to pursue CID grant funding from the FRA. Some amount of *Pioneer* restoration study funds could possibly be included as part of the intercity rail portion of Oregon legislature's upcoming 2025 transportation package.

*Brian Yanity is a RUN Board member and vice president of RailPAC.*

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