

Amtrak's 1999 Status—Spotlight on Appropriators

Will They Let New Amtrak Laws Work?

House Transportation Appropriations Chairman Frank Wolf (R-VA), at his recent Amtrak hearing, implied that he may be inclined to let Amtrak implement its strategic business plan based on the laws and funding passed in 1997 (Oct. '97 News). But his Senate counterpart, Richard Shelby (R-AL), raised doubts about appropriating *any* more funds for Amtrak.

Shelby's March 24 hearing, "Amtrak's Future and Passenger Rail Alternatives," did not even include Amtrak or the Department of Transportation witnesses. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Deputy Director Jacob (Jack) L. Lew did testify, affirming the good news that Amtrak, DOT and OMB now agree on Amtrak's budget request (Feb. News).

House: Moving Forward?

Wolf—at his March 11 hearing—said, "I believe America needs a cost-effective and efficient national rail system...In terms of getting Amtrak on a solid footing, all three of [former Amtrak President] Tom Downs' requests have now been met—capital funding, legal reform, and restructuring." Actually, we would say that "two-and-one-half" of these needs have been met. Appropriators must provide more capital for Amtrak, funds which already have been authorized.

Wolf was somewhat skeptical of the concept of using some appropriated capital on maintenance, but seemed ready to keep an open mind on the subject. He also showed concern about using Taxpayer Relief Act capital funds on employee wage increases; Acting Amtrak President George Warrington promised to keep such costs in a separate account.

However, Warrington and Board Members Sylvia DeLeon and Amy Rosen defended last year's Amtrak/Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMW) agreement. Warrington said, "Our ability to recruit and retain employees is highly dependent on competitive wages." He said it takes \$99,000 and two years to train a catenary lineman; linemen earn \$21.91 on Metro North but only \$16.93 on Amtrak. Similarly, electricians get \$23.10, \$21.49 and \$16.10 on the Long Island Rail Road, Metro North and Amtrak, respectively.

Rosen said the BMW agreement—if also applied to the 12 Amtrak unions without new contracts—would increase Amtrak's annual costs by a net \$38 million, after accounting for productivity improvements. She said Amtrak, with \$1 billion in annual passenger revenues, could manage this.

She also said that, even though not all the contingencies in the BMW agreement have been met, "The Administration's budget looks entirely adequate and we don't have a reason now to walk away from [the agreement]."

Warrington said Amtrak must do as much market research for the national system as has already been done for the

Northeast Corridor. "We need to develop a plan to increase our market share. We need to know how we can be relevant ...today—not compared to where we went in 1958. This has been a very emotionally charged discussion—some said we cut too much [service], others said 'not enough,' or that there should be nothing but corridors." But in the meantime, he said—with the more flexible definition of capital—"the [Administration's] proposed funding will work."

In a March 31 statement to the Wolf Subcommittee, NARP strongly supported Amtrak's 1999 budget request, including the flexible definition of capital.

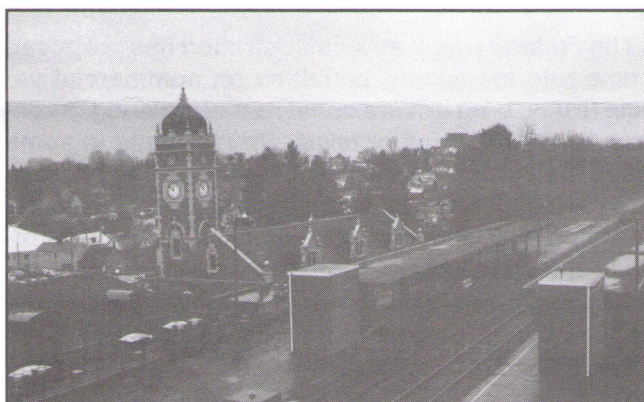
Senate: Scrap Amtrak?

Shelby warned, "Our ability to fund non-highway spending in the 1999 bill will be constrained by the ISTEA-driven expectations of a much larger national highway system...Providing appropriated funds [for Amtrak] in addition to the TRA funds may not be warranted, and under the current budgetary constraints, may be impractical."

Answering pro-Amtrak Senators' complaints that he was ready to discard last year's work, Shelby said, "Amtrak is not very efficient in my part of the world. It runs through Birmingham and Tuscaloosa only every other day [sic]. We don't have much. Our people don't believe they're getting a fair

(continued on page 2)

RESTORED GEM IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA



—W. Blake Young

The beautifully renovated Greensburg, PA, Amtrak station was dedicated February 18, with a new passenger area, visitor information booth, a food vendor starting March 1, and a brew-pub in May. It is a stop for the *Three Rivers* and the *Pennsylvanian*.

The Jacobean-revival station was built by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1911 as part of a project to regrade the line through the city. The Penn Central closed the main part of the station in 1971, forcing passengers to wait in a dim space beneath the tracks. A 1980's restoration effort failed, but ownership and coordination by the local non-profit Westmoreland Trust finally saw it through.

Appropriations Hearings

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shake. I know Amtrak is important here [in the Northeast] and that it works. Perhaps it can be better in our area. For us to support it, it can't be just a regional thing."

NARP agrees there should be more trains throughout the U.S., but this would not result from the policies Shelby is considering. Slade Gorton (R-WA) asked, "If we abandoned Amtrak and required the track owners to offer the use of their facilities to any organization that wanted to run trains under the terms Amtrak gets, what trains would there be?" Ken Mead, DOT Inspector General (and formerly of the GAO), answered: "It could be [just the Northeast]. Nowhere else in the world totally makes ends meet."

Mead might have added that the freight railroads would vigorously oppose efforts to extend to other parties anything even vaguely resembling the access rights Amtrak now enjoys. These rights permit Amtrak to exist.

Nonetheless, Reason Foundation President Robert W. Poole, Jr., said, "The most promising privatization model for U.S. passenger service is competitive contracting for commuter and regional (conventional) rail service. There are perhaps a dozen city-pairs in this country where the level of subsidy for such service might be relatively modest, especially under the strong cost-reducing incentives of competitive bidding—and if such service were freed from Amtrak's restrictive labor conditions and traditional railroad liability and retirement programs. But since such service would be a matter of local and/or regional interest, it is an issue for decision-making and funding at those levels of government rather than at the federal level."

Philadelphia Mayor Ed Rendell called himself the darling of the Reason Foundation because "I privatized 42 functions in my city successfully. But private companies are interested in profit, not reach of service...If you apply [privatization] to all of Amtrak, it will cost service to the constituents of most of the

PROTECTING TRAINS FROM TRUCKS

The Federal Highway Administration has proposed a new rule increasing penalties on commercial vehicle (truck, bus) drivers convicted of violating grade-crossing regulations or laws. Drivers—and in some cases their employers—would be subject to a fine of up to \$10,000 for such a conviction. Drivers' permits would be suspended at least 60 days for the first offense and up to 120 days for subsequent convictions.

Trucks which get stuck on crossings or whose drivers violate crossing warnings are a serious problem for Amtrak. These accidents have been by far the biggest cause of serious Amtrak derailments in the 1990's. While such accidents killed no Amtrak passengers, they caused hundreds of injuries (passengers being most numerous) and cost Amtrak millions in damages and lost revenue.

[Norfolk Southern, in its new annual report, says it "closed more than 200 crossings in 1997."]

FHWA Docket 97-3103 was in the March 2 Federal Register. Send comments until May 1 to U.S. DOT Dockets, Room PL-401, 400-7th St., SW, Washington, DC 20590-0001.

BOTH TRA AND APPROPRIATIONS NEEDED!

"Last year, because of the tax refund [TRA money] for Amtrak, the Senate Appropriations Committee eliminated Amtrak's general capital appropriation for FY '98. I am here today to urge you not to repeat last year's actions but to provide the necessary capital funding for Amtrak. As you know, the \$2.3 billion capital fund for Amtrak was intended to supplement, not supplant, annual capital appropriations."

—Senate Finance Chair William V. Roth, Jr.
(R-DE), witness at March 24 hearing

Senate...We've increased funding for all the other modes. We need to save rural service and if the Northeast Corridor subsidizes that, so be it."

Five senators (three witnesses, two subcommittee members) had strong pro-Amtrak statements: Baucus (D-MT), Biden (D-DE), Lautenberg (D-NJ), Reid (D-NV) and Roth (R-DE). Biden spoke for many advocates, saying, "I'm not sure why we're here today to view alternatives to Amtrak, when five months ago the Senate unanimously voted to invest in Amtrak. Given that, you might not expect Amtrak to have a problem getting an appropriation. I guess I may be wrong on that—here we are, considering alternatives to it already...Senator Hutchison and Senator Lott have made it clear that the TRA money is a supplement—not a substitute—to appropriations. It would be short-sighted to fail now..."

Lautenberg—the subcommittee's ranking Democrat—said Amtrak "provides important service in areas of the country that are not as congested as other corridors...In fact, this subcommittee heard testimony just weeks ago from the GAO pointing out that recent trends in airline competition have meant the significant loss or elimination of quality air service at affordable prices to many small and medium sized cities in many different regions of the country."

Baucus said, "Our region passionately believes in Amtrak...We desperately hope this Committee will continue to fund Amtrak for all regions."

Reid, known especially for his advocacy of technologically advanced solutions said, "I'm pleased there is about \$1 billion for maglev in ISTEA, but until that comes along, we will need Amtrak. I hope at the next hearing we will have Amtrak here to talk about Amtrak's future. The GAO can't tell us what Amtrak's plans are. Oversight agencies and privatizers don't have the daily responsibility of running trains under conditions of chronic undercapitalization." ■

"We have to separate the question of whether we should subsidize Amtrak from whether Amtrak does well...We don't evaluate the finances of every mile of new road, we just say we need more roads...There are massive cross-subsidies within the federal highway program. No one can say every federal dollar goes back where it came from, especially over many years. Even if all were well at Amtrak, there would still be the question of whether only private routes should survive. That's not where we want to go."

—OMB Deputy Director Jacob (Jack) L. Lew,
witness at March 24 hearing

JACK STITH

NARP Member John P. Stith of Richmond, VA, 59, died February 10 after a brief illness. Jack was a past NARP Region 4 board member, and was on the ballot again for this spring. He edited the newsletters of the Virginia Association of Railway Patrons and the Old Dominion Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society, was the vice president of the VARP, and will be missed by all three groups.

After teaching for several years, Jack was the principal at Falling Creek Middle School (1968-93), and retired in 1994. That gave him more time for his train interests, including NARP. He was keenly interested in train improvements benefiting his native Richmond, and welcomed the 1997 inaugural of Amtrak's *Twilight Shoreliner*. He looked forward to—and actively worked toward—the reopening of Main Street Station next year, and corridor improvements planned by Virginia authorities.

COMMUTER RAIL CONSIDERED IN MINNESOTA

Minnesota DOT has begun the second phase of a study of potential commuter rail corridors in the Twin Cities area. This phase narrows 19 preliminary corridors to six:

- Bethel [on former Amtrak Duluth route]-Minneapolis-St. Paul
- Elk River [on *Empire Builder* route]-Minneapolis-St. Paul
- Hastings [on *Empire Builder* route]-St. Paul-Minneapolis
- Forest Lake-St. Paul-Minneapolis
- Northfield-Minneapolis-St. Paul
- Minneapolis-St. Paul

The study is guided by a steering committee made up of the DOT, freight railroads, the Metropolitan Council, counties and others. More information is at web site <<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/ofrw/>>.

PHOENIX WEST LINE—NARP submitted a statement (shown on our web site) to the Federal Railroad Administration March 13 opposing Union Pacific's plans to remove signals from this former route segment of Amtrak's *Sunset Limited*. NARP cited UP freight congestion problems and the possible return of passenger trains through the large and growing Phoenix metropolitan area.

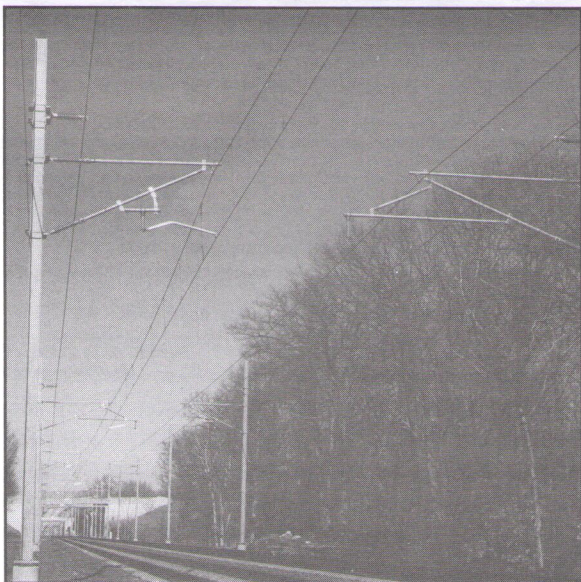
ISTEA CONFERENCE: YOU CAN HELP

The Senate passed S 1173 March 12, 96-4 (Mar. News); the House passed HR 2400 April 1, 337-80. Both ISTEA-renewal bills preserve most of what was good about ISTEA's structure. However, only S 1173 adds intercity passenger rail to the choices states can make in spending National Highway System and Surface Transportation Program funds. This crucial 'flexibility' provision has no counterpart in HR 2400.

HR 2400 does have \$10 million a year for high-speed corridor grade crossings, \$25 million a year for Swift Act research, \$10 million a year for corridor planning. It has about \$1 billion for so-called green projects, including intercity passenger rail in Georgia, Oregon and Virginia, stations in Sacramento and in Springfield and Worcester, MA, and \$10 million for Detroit-Lansing service. The Boston North Station-South Station Rail Link is listed as "authorized for final design and construction."

Funding from contract authority (more likely to happen; no appropriation required) includes \$5 million a year of the House's and Senate's corridor grade-crossing funds, the House's demo projects (not the Rail Link), and \$30 million of the Senate bill's total \$980 million for magnetic levitation system work.

Please ask your legislators to work for the House-Senate conference committee to get the best deal possible for intercity passenger rail, including flexibility as noted in the first paragraph above. Act quickly; all work likely will be done by mid-May.



N.E. CATENARY PROGRESS

Electrification construction is on schedule between New Haven and Boston. As of March 11, 64% of catenary pole foundations were in place, 29% of poles erected, and 8% of overhead wire installed.

The left photo is from February, taken near Davisville, RI; the right is from October, 1997 east of New London, CT. The poles are 220 feet apart, though closer on curves.

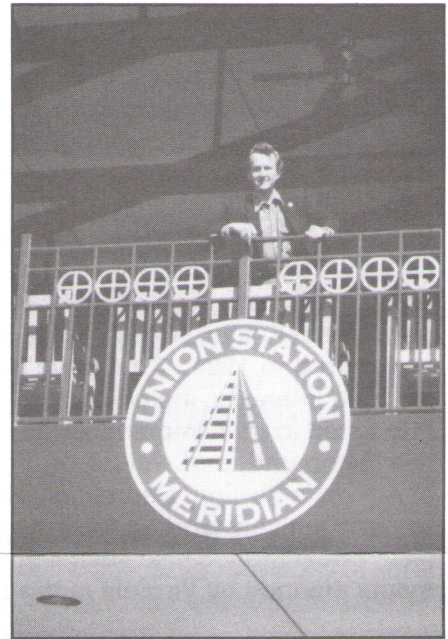
Catenary work will be complete in the summer of 1999—about 85 years after it was first proposed.

—Amtrak

BEAUTIFUL MERIDIAN INTERMODAL PROJECT COMPLETED



Opening of the Meridian, MS, intermodal terminal, incorporating part of the old Union Station, was marked by a ceremony December 12, 1997. The next day, Mayor John Robert Smith (right, on balcony overlooking tracks) was married on that balcony, with the honeymoon couple departing afterwards on Amtrak's *Crescent*. The station—seen here in March—also houses Greyhound, local transit, economic development agency and Norfolk Southern offices, and meeting rooms. A railroad museum is planned for the nearby Railway Express Agency Building. Smith got NARP's Golden Spike Award in 1995 (June '95 *News*).



—Ross B. Capon

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Schedules—Northeast Corridor changes took effect April 5. There is an 11th New York-Albany round trip. The 7:30 pm Metroliners move to 7:00 pm; *Twilight Shoreliner* arrives Boston later (6:55 am); some *Keystone* trains serve Exton, PA, but Malvern and Whitford lose Amtrak service (they still have SEPTA trains); the *Mohawk* runs earlier (4:10 am from Niagara Falls).

Intercity with its May 17 change will restore the connection at Chicago from the *Texas Eagle* to the *Empire Builder* (by having the latter depart at 3:00 pm, an hour later than now). This important connection was broken in May 1997.

Wilson, NC, will be a *Silver Palm* stop, and that train's connection with the *Carolinian* will be moved there from

Rocky Mount. Wilson was to get an Amtrak agent in late March, upon renovation completion.

Connecting Buses—Bieber Tourways runs four buses a day from Amtrak's 30th St. Station (Philadelphia) to Quakertown, Bethlehem, Allentown and Reading, PA. Connecting rail passengers buy bus tickets from the driver. Most runs make frequent stops.

Automated Train Information—The Amtrak toll-free number (800/872-7245) now has an automated feature allowing callers to check train status without speaking to a reservations agent. The caller will be asked to enter a train number, two-letter state code, and first three letters of the station in question (not the Amtrak three-letter station code, which often is different and not known to most passengers).



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