



Amtrak Funding Flat-Lined

Amtrak Gets \$1.207 Billion, Subject to Loan Repayment, Other Earmarks

The general media portrayed Amtrak as a winner in the fiscal 2005 omnibus spending bill which Congress initially approved November 20 and finally passed December 6, after removing a controversial, non-transportation item. The \$388 billion bill funds thirteen government departments through September 30, 2005, the fiscal year's end.

The *Washington Post*, on its November 21 front page reported: "Although a few favored agencies, such as Amtrak and NASA, were spared cuts, the measure bears evidence of a new austerity in domestic spending, brought about by soaring budget deficits and the rising costs of war and counterterrorism programs".

The December 7 *Post* continued, "the

measure...represents one of the most austere budgets for domestic departments, with rare exceptions, in the past decade."

Amtrak in the Federal Budget

Amtrak's supporters worked hard to get Amtrak its relatively favored status. Some of those who deserve thanks: Sen. Murray (D-WA), ranking member of the Appropriations subcommittee; Sen. Specter (R-PA), an Appropriations subcommittee member; Rep. Bill Young (R-FL), House Appropriations Committee chair; and everyone who signed the pro-Amtrak letters to appropriators earlier this year.

Amtrak and passenger rail still face a harsh reality: even though an Amtrak with renewed credibility repeatedly highlighted key infrastructure investment backlogs—like three outdated river bridges in Connecticut—Amtrak funding was reduced.

(continued on page 2)

"We agree that preservation and improvement of the Northeast Corridor and other short distance routes are vital. But the money which could be saved by eliminating most or all national network (long-distance) routes would be insignificant when measured against corridor needs.

"Moreover, the national network accounts for about half of all Amtrak travel (in terms of passenger-miles). Eliminating that network, while preserving every existing short-distance service, would create a 21-state "system" of four isolated mini-networks, significantly compromising its usefulness to the traveling public while weakening Amtrak's ability to get federal funding. Key Republican Senators have repeatedly made clear that survival of the national network is essential for their continued support of Amtrak, and indeed have criticized Amtrak for spending too much in the Northeast."

—NARP November 22 News Release on DOT Inspector General's Report; full story at right; go to our website or send us a S.A.S.E. for the full text

FY 2005 Federal Budget: The Big Picture

Overall, "Administration and Congressional budget analysts expect domestic discretionary spending will increase about 1%." However, since the military is expected to rise 10%, "to more than \$500 billion" including Iraq costs, total discretionary spending will rise 4%, to about \$891 billion (*New York Times*, Nov. 23).

DOT IG Issues Amtrak Assessment

DOT Inspector General Kenneth M. Mead issued his "Assessment of Amtrak's 2003 and 2004 Financial Performance and Requirements" in November. The report, dated November 18, was released to the public on November 29. Both the report and NARP's release in response are available on our website.

Mead in effect endorsed everything Amtrak has said about the importance of increasing federal funding for Amtrak so it can address "increasing levels of deferred infrastructure and fleet investment."

But he is disturbed that Amtrak "plans to continue operating the status quo system." He suggests Congress provide "clear direction," listing these options as illustrate what that might mean:

- "A requirement to focus development

on corridors where passenger rail service can make economic sense.

- "Decreased funding and elimination of certain operations.
- "Increased funding for further development of the existing system.
- "Maintaining and funding the existing system.
- "Any combination of the above."

Since Mead foresees no increase in federal funding, he leans towards the first two alternatives and criticizes Amtrak for "programming millions of scarce capital dollars for fixing long-distance sleeping cars when bridges that Amtrak owns are beyond their functional and economic lives and must be refurbished." NARP responded to this and other comments in the report by issuing a news release ■

Detailing the Amtrak Reduction

NASA, the other program the *Washington Post* cited as a winner, was increased \$822 million (albeit \$44 million short of Bush's request). This caused the across-the-board spending cut—imposed on most domestic programs except Homeland Security—to rise from 0.75% to 0.83%. The across-the-board cut cost Amtrak \$10.1 million. Other elements of the effective cut Amtrak must absorb:

- Inflation;
- The mandate to devote \$20 million a year in fiscal 2005-2009 to repaying the \$100 million DOT loan;
- Earmarking "up to \$4 million... to retain a consultant...to assist the Secretary in preparing a comprehensive valuation of Amtrak's assets to be completed [by] September 30, 2005";

[The valuation is to be used to "develop to the Secretary's satisfaction a methodology for determining the avoidable and fully allocated costs of each route." Amtrak, Federal Railroad Administration, and consultants have already done much work on this. It is doubtful that spending \$4 million on yet more methodology work is a wise use of scarce funds.]

- Letting the Secretary "reprogram up to \$2.5 million [to] develop and implement a procedure for fair competitive bidding by Amtrak and non-Amtrak operators for State-supported routes." [Given the opposition of both the track-owning freight railroads and rail labor to non-Amtrak intercity passenger operators, the utility of this language is uncertain at best.]

- \$60 million of Amtrak's funds are held back to the July-September quarter in case they are needed to fund Surface Transportation Board orders for the continuation of commuter rail services if Amtrak ceases such service.

For the latest news, visit our website at <www.narprail.org>. Our news hotline is posted Friday afternoon.



—Robert Albritton / Railroad Controls Limited

An excellent example of improving grade crossing safety is pictured above. The Trinity Railway Express grade crossing on Wildwood Road in Irving, Tex. is protected by quad-gates. The crossing apparatus also sounds a wayside horn that is directed to the roadway and not to nearby homes and businesses. The horn, which railroads will be able to implement nationwide later this year when FRA rules become effective, shows a visual "X" to the train engineer on approach. If the "X" on the signal is not lit, the engineer must then sound the train horn. The system is manufactured by Railroad Controls Limited.

Customers Recognized for Service to Amtrak

The Amtrak Customer Advisory Committee (ACAC) Disabled & Senior Task Force (DSTF) received a 2004 President's Service & Safety Award, Amtrak's highest honor.

As volunteers, the task force won in the Champion of the Rails category by working on issues that concern the disabled and senior community. Accomplishments include:

- developing and implementing a sensitivity training program for Thruway bus drivers,
- contributing to the improvement of Interactive Response System ("Julie," Amtrak's automated phone information lady),
- suggesting the new generation of Quik-Trak machines be ADA compliant,
- conducting passenger outreach programs in stations and with disabled associations.
- improving the current Special Service Request system, that is, improving Amtrak's ability to respond reliably when

a passenger, in making a reservation, asks for such things as a wheelchair or special food.

DSTF members are Craig Andersen, Eleanor Cunningham, and Barbara Grill. They thank ACAC Administrator Kate Warr for helping them accomplish their goals, as well as past DSTF members H. Lawrence Swartz and Phil Copeland, whose work when they were ACAC members helped lead to this award. ■

Transit Progress

Dallas opened a 1.25 mile spur from Union Station to "Victory Station" (at American Airlines Center, Dallas' main indoor sports arena) on November 12. Spur is part of longer Northwest line to open in 2007; initial service at arena event times only.

The Detroit People Mover resumed full service on its entire 2.9 mile loop on September 3 following two years of construction at the Renaissance Center station.

Minneapolis opened the final stage (four additional miles) of the Hiawatha Light Rail system on December 4. Extension serves Minneapolis Airport (both terminals), Bloomington, and the Mall of America (Transit Center, lower level).

2005 Funding (from page 1)

A bigger concern than the funding bill's immediate impact is the possibility that Amtrak funding will not exceed \$1.2 billion for the next four years. (See page one report on the DOT Inspector General's Assessment.) ■

Amtrak Improves Equipment Assignments

Shortly after the November 1 timetable change, Amtrak shuffled equipment assignments with the goal of improving passengers' comfort. A focus of this effort was "corridor" trains with total trip times over ten hours.

- Responding to a long-standing request from NARP and the Empire State Passengers Association, the *Maple Leaf* (New York-Albany-Buffalo-Toronto) gained Amfleet II coaches with leg and foot rests and more leg room. One Amfleet I coach remains for local travelers.

- The *Adirondack* (New York-Albany-Montreal) now uses ex-Metroliner cars (without First Class), featuring a full-table cafe car, increased legroom in coach seats and footrests.

Improvements elsewhere include:

- assignment of Capstone (rebuilt Amfleet I) cars to the *Carolynian*, and adding a fourth coach to the train thanks to loss of the mail car. (The Charlotte storage track limits the train's length.)

- when demand warrants (e.g. Thanksgiving travel rush), more coaches—five in-

stead of three or four—have been operating on the *Silver Meteor*, *Silver Star* and *Crescent*.

- upgrading Midwest Corridor trains by adding rebuilt Cafe-Business Class cars (June News) to the equipment pool there, giving the service a long-needed boost. On or about May 1, Amtrak expects to end completely the sale of coach seats as Business Class on these trains.

A fifth daily New York-Florida sleeping car begins December 15, and a sixth *Auto Train* sleeper starts January 15. ■

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Three Rivers—Last New York-Chicago runs originate March 6, not March 1. New York-Pittsburgh only service returns March 7 on a schedule to be determined. It will connect in Pittsburgh with *Capitol Limited* to/from Chicago, but layover time could be substantial, so New York-Philadelphia travelers (perhaps others) should consider connecting with *Capitol Limited* in Washington.

Thruway Bus eliminations—Greyhound ended Modesto-Riverbank-Oakdale-Sonora service. Greyhound also eliminated Los Angeles Union Station stops for their Callexico and El Centro runs. The busses still operate, but Amtrak passengers are responsible for transfer to/from the Los Angeles Greyhound station.

Winter recreational items—On *Ethan Allen*, *Adirondack*, *Vermont*, and Superliner-equipped trains, skis, snowboards, and other non-motorized winter recreational items are allowed as carry-on luggage. They will be stored in the Superliner outside utility lockers and permitted inside coaches on the trains listed above if the conductor agrees they can be transported safely. They are added to the list of allowable carry-ons that do not count against the two-bag-per-person limit.

Raton Carry-on Limit—Through late April, travelers to/from Raton, NM, are allowed four carry-on luggage pieces, rather than two. This is because the November 1 timetable erroneously shows checked baggage service at Raton, which actually is unstaffed during the winter.

Superliner Sightseer Lounges—Personal food and non-alcoholic beverage items are once again allowed in the upper level, but are still banned from lower level and all single-level food service cars.

Superliner Lower Level Seating—To be assured of Lower Level Seating in Superliner coaches, you must reserve in advance when booking your Amtrak reservation. There is no additional charge, even on the *Auto Train* which formerly did have such a charge. Without a ticket endorsed "LOWR", you can occupy a lower level seat only with the conductor's permission, which depends on a seat being available the full length of your trip.

Reservations—Effective November 1, all weekend Northeast Corridor *Regional* trains (including Washington-Springfield through trains) began requiring reservations. *Clocker*, *Keystone*, and New Haven-Springfield shuttle trains remain unreserved.

Random on-board ticket verification—At the Transportation Security Administration's direction, Amtrak conductors have begun random identification checks of passengers whose ticket number has a last digit that corresponds with a number chosen at the start of the trip. In event of lack of identification, or improper name matching, conductors generally call Amtrak Police for further direction, but also may accept reasonable explanations for lack of ID. Failure to present a valid photo ID on board is not itself grounds for ejection from a train.

Amtrak Employees: Beyond the Call of Duty

Several Amtrak employees have been recognized for going above and beyond the call of duty for the safety of Amtrak passengers and others.

Amtrak police officer Rodney Chambers wrestled what was believed to be a live grenade from a man at Washington Union Station back in June 2003. He held the explosive until the bomb squad could check it. The National Association of Police Organizations (NAPO) honored Chambers with its 2004 "Top Cops" award. He is the first Amtrak officer NAPO has recognized.

On August 30, 2004, twelve inches of rain fell in Richmond, VA, in two hours. The resulting flash floods came without warning during the afternoon rush hour—just as Amtrak's *Regional* train #66 was arriving at Main Street Station.

Amtrak engineer Jim Brooks, Conductor Jerry Reid and Assistant Conductor Steve Gist quickly realized the severity of the situation. Residents and business owners in the Shokoe Bottom neighborhood trapped by the rushing waters headed for the waiting room of Main Street Station, the highest point in the area. The crew ushered the stranded people onto their train and then backed it to higher ground at CSX's Fulton Yard.

Brooks, Reid and Gist cared for their passengers until 9:00 a.m. the next day. By this time, roads were cleared and busses could take passengers to their destinations.

Amtrak Begins Sleeper Wait List

If a train has no sleeping-car space, now you can ask a reservation sales agent to put you on the wait list. If space becomes available, Amtrak's Outbound Marketing desk will call you. Meanwhile, you can call in and check on your place "in line." This service is not available on Amtrak.com.

The re-birth of the sleeping car wait list responds to a long-standing request from NARP and national network train users.

The new system is superior to the manual, error-prone list of Amtrak's early days, as well as to the most effective, recent alternative—calling right after 3:01 a.m. Eastern Time, when the system purges unpaid reservations whose hold limits have expired.

In 2003, Matt Hardison, Amtrak's Chief of Sales Distribution and Customer Service, told his department to look for an in-house, low-cost solution to the waitlist problem, using existing reservations system capabilities. The new wait list began limited, "shadow" testing in May 2004 and now is fully operational.

NARP applauds this long-needed improvement and a cost-effective way was found to improve revenue and customer satisfaction.

Rail Travel Tips

Tip #5—Baggage choices

Amtrak officially limits carry-on luggage to two pieces a passenger; bags may not exceed 28"x22"x14" and 50 pounds. "Personal items such as briefcases, purses, laptops, and infant paraphernalia" (<<http://www.amtrak.com>>) do not count against the limit of two. For some trains, the exceptions list includes winter recreational items (see page three). The list does not include "standard large-sized shopping bags of merchandise," but you can combine "shopping bags, one inside the other, to count as one bag." Amtrak encourages you to have

merchants ship your purchases. Large musical instruments may occupy a seat "at the applicable rail fare" if there's no safety problem.

Where checked baggage is offered, up to three bags (size and weight limits as above) may be checked free [some special items have a \$5 charge]; up to three more for \$10 a bag. Also, where Amtrak Package Express is offered (over 100 stations), you can ship larger bags (up to 3'x3'x3'; maximum 500 pounds per shipment and, again, 50 pounds per bag).

That said, in markets without checked baggage service, unfortunately, Amtrak's luggage policy is more restrictive than the airlines'.

box for postal statement



National Association of Railroad Passengers

NARP News

Vol. 38, No. 11

December 2004

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

George Chilson, President; **Wayne Davis**, **Arthur Poole**, **David Randall**, **Robert J. Stewart**, Vice Presidents; **Albert L. Papp, Jr.**, Secretary; **Robert W. Glover**, Treasurer;

Ross B. Capon, Executive Director; **David R. Johnson**, Assistant Director; **La'Toya Harrington**, Director of Finance and Administration; **Tiffanie H. Childs**, Office Manager

National Association of Railroad Passengers *NARP News* (ISSN 0739-3490), published monthly (except Nov.) by NARP; 900 Second St., NE, Suite 308; Washington, DC 20002-3557; 202/408-8362, fax 202/408-8287, <narp@narprail.org>, <www.narprail.org>. ©2004 National Association of Railroad Passengers. All rights reserved. Membership dues \$30/year (\$16 under 21/over 65), of which \$5 is a subscription to *NARP News*. Periodicals Postage Paid at Washington, D.C., and at additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes to National Association of Railroad Passengers *NARP News*; 900 Second St., NE, Suite 308; Washington, DC 20002-3557.

(This has news through December 8. Vol. 38, No. 10 was mailed first-class November 30.)