



Amtrak Requests \$1.6 Billion “Plus”

Amtrak submitted its 2007 Grant and Legislative Request to Capitol Hill on March 14. Amtrak requested \$1.598 billion for Fiscal 2007, but also outlined what it could do with \$275 million more [see sidebar, page 3], bringing the total implied request to \$1.873 billion.

The \$1.598 Billion “Basic” Ask

• Amtrak says a **\$498 million federal grant for operations** “represents a significant stretch goal [which] is \$42 million below the approved FY 2006 budget [of \$540 million] and \$88 million below the DOT Inspector General’s (IG) baseline operating budget.”

The DOT IG on January 5 established a \$586 million baseline for Amtrak’s FY06 operating funding requirement in order to decide whether to certify that Amtrak has achieved “operating efficiencies.” Survival of on-board food service and sleeping cars—and thus many trains—after July 1 depends on that certification.

Amtrak’s approved FY 2006 budget assumes a \$540 million federal operating grant. [Only \$490 million was appropriated, requiring Amtrak to “supplement operations with its own cash balances.”]

• The **\$553 million capital grant request** (plus \$177 million in non-federal

funding) includes:

\$441 million for infrastructure,

\$176 million for “rolling stock reliability investments” [same as budgeted for this year] including “overhauls and remanufacture of corridor fleet...along with long distance Superliner coach fleet. If funded, over two-thirds of [cars] and 90% of [locomotives] would be back in a state of good repair.”

\$135 million for “business initiatives and other investment...to reduce future operating requirements,” up \$75 million from current levels “but will result in a first

(continued on page 3)

Appropriators Face Another Tough Year to Meet Many Demands

Amtrak was reviewed briefly in a long House hearing on the entire DOT March 7; there was more detail at a Senate hearing March 16; the Senate committee plans a separate aviation hearing.

House Hearing

The House Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Treasury, and Housing and Urban Development, The Judiciary, District of Columbia is chaired by Joseph Knollenberg (R-MI). He acknowledged that \$900 million in President Bush’s budget was a “significant increase” above his fiscal 2005 proposal of zero for Amtrak.

Knollenberg called Amtrak “one of our most challenging issues. Some love it, some hate it. I support reform. We’re going to push that hard.”

Ranking Member John Olver (D-MA) noted that Bush proposes to fund Amtrak \$394 million below the actual Fiscal 2006 level: “Last year it was starve Amtrak to reform it, this year it’s business as usual. If President Bush took his comments about imported oil seriously, maybe we would already have a rail passenger network.”

Asked about Amtrak’s debt service ob-

ligations, Mineta made the wildly incorrect claim that Amtrak pays interest “at Treasury rates, as low as you can get” (see debt service discussions, page 3).

Rep. James Clyburn (D-SC), chairman of the House Democratic Caucus and a member of the Congressional Black Caucus, asked about the demographics of Amtrak travelers in the Southeast. Mineta: “As I recall, less than 30% use the entire route. There are a lot using 300-500 mile segments.” To ignore high average trip lengths on the long-distance trains—the only Amtrak trains in the Southeast—is to falsely imply that they could be replaced by a series of short-distance services.

Clyburn pressed Mineta: “I want demographics of those travelers. I hear from my constituents how much they appreciate and need Amtrak. They feel threatened by questions about Amtrak’s future.”

Rep. Steven Rothman (D-NJ) said, “I understand the concern about food, and that it is a well meant effort to reduce costs, but it loses a sense of the importance of the national system. It’s sort of like regulating the size of the hamburg-

ers they sell on the interstates.”

Senate Hearing

Chairman Christopher Bond (R-MO) and Ranking Member Patty Murray (D-WA)—of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Treasury, the Judiciary, Housing and Urban Development—highlighted the big budget holes the subcommittee faces in the many programs it covers, due to the Bush budget request. This includes \$400 million just to get Amtrak to this year’s \$1.3 billion, and \$1.6 billion for aviation.

But Murray also noted that DOT, with overall spending up almost 5%, fared better than many other departments.

Bond said the Bush budget assumes many “fees and rescissions that Congress will not approve,” noting in particular a “\$2 billion rescission of Section 8 [low-income housing] funds that I don’t think are available.”

Amtrak Chairman David Laney discussed Amtrak’s newly unveiled 2007 grant request (lead story).

Federal Railroad Administrator Joseph H. Boardman, who has become DOT’s regular Amtrak witness, trotted out

(continued on page 2)

Amtrak Working Group: Separate R and D Reports Issued

Republican and Democratic members of the Amtrak Working Group, formed last November by House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman Don Young (R-AK), reported separately in mid-March.

Young asked the Group to review reports on Amtrak by the GAO [especially GAO-06-145, Oct., 2005, on management], the Amtrak IG, and the DOT IG, and “recommend whether a special Committee taskforce with authority to conduct hearings should be created.”

The Republicans—Baker, LA; Ehlers, MI; Graves, MO; Kennedy, MN; Boozman, AR—did not call for a taskforce but “recommended that future Amtrak oversight continue to be conducted by the full” T&I committee. They also took swipes at Amtrak’s long distance ser-

vices; four of these legislators (all except Ehlers) voted against the Brown amendment last June and thus in favor of eliminating all long-distance routes.

The Republicans also called for yet another GAO study—of “private and public accountability standards” that could apply to Amtrak. The majority report emphasizes the problems of freight and passenger trains sharing tracks; no mention of investment “targeted to network chokepoints” (p. 3, shaded sidebar).

The Democratic report—by Cummings, MD; Nadler, NY; Baird, WA—was upbeat, focusing on Amtrak’s progress in accounting and financial practices, and noting the multitude of reporting and approval requirements Amtrak already faces. It endorsed the Railroads Subcommittee

as “concerned about Amtrak’s management and performance and [having] the resources to oversee implementation of the recommendations of the” GAO report.

The Republicans urge President Bush to work with the Senate to get more board members confirmed; the Democrats plan to ask the DOT IG to investigate whether the board “is adequately carrying out its legal and fiduciary responsibilities”; Amtrak’s David Hughes told the Republicans Amtrak has either implemented or is progressing on many of the GAO’s recommendations. ■

Both reports are at <<http://www.house.gov/transportation>>; for the Democratic one, click on “Minority Site” (tiny print at bottom), then on “Railroads”.

Corrections

In our December lead story, the last sentence on page one should have read, “Food is pre-cooked ‘off-site’ (in this case, off the train), and then heated in convection (not microwave) ovens on the train.” Also, we were wrong to suggest that elimination of pre-plated meals would help where an ordered Kosher meal “does not show up.”

Denver area transit projects will be funded by a tax on retail sales and a use tax on equipment leases, not by a motor fuel tax (January News, page 3, 2011 to 2014 in “Wheels of Progress”).

Groundbreaking in St. Louis!



—David Randall

St. Louis Gateway Transportation Center’s Multi-Modal Terminal Building and Concourse had its long-awaited ground breaking March 30. Dignitaries on hand included Acting Amtrak President and CEO David Hughes (sixth from right, above). The facility, due to open in about 15 months, will serve Amtrak, light rail, and local and intercity buses.

Hearings

(from page 1)

Mineta’s tired old rhetoric: “Amtrak’s business model is flawed and must be reformed. Amtrak does not yet have effective budget discipline...”

Senior Economist Mark Dayton of the DOT Office of Inspector credited Amtrak with progress “in reforming its food service provision,” and said Amtrak’s control of operating losses had improved.

He reiterated Former DOT Inspector General (IG) Ken Mead’s claim that Amtrak needs \$1.4 billion just to keep the existing system intact, without any significant improvement in state of good repair, and with little margin for unexpected problems. Dayton, who on April 3 left to work for Homeland Security, sup-

ported creation of a separate working capital appropriation of \$125 million, which would be reserved for emergencies.

But he attacked as “unacceptable” any sleeping-car subsidy, and criticized the lack of “even a pilot program for its elimination.” NARP views this as undermining all long-distance service, particularly when coupled with the IG’s recommendation that “power to determine [Amtrak] services [devolve] to the states.” States focus on intrastate needs, which is why NARP and Amtrak say that national network trains are a federal responsibility. ■

For the latest news, visit our website at <www.narprail.org> and click on “Hotline News.” It is posted Friday afternoons.

N.O.-Mobile Line in Doubt

The Senate Appropriations Committee April 4 approved \$700 million with which Mississippi could buy the busy CSX line that was rebuilt for \$250 million after Katrina.

The state would replace the line with a highway; rail freight would add to congestion on inland rail lines. Mississippi Power Pres. Anthony Topazi said, “there won’t be a new track that crosses...Mississippi” (S. *Mississippi Sun-Herald*, Apr. 4).

The Southern Rapid Rail Transit Commission favors retaining the existing rail line for passenger and local freight services.

year benefit of at least \$43 million in operating cost reductions...Includes improvements in redesigned food service cars, sales and distribution systems, mechanical facilities, management information and other technology."

\$155 million for legal mandates.

- **Debt service totals \$295 million**, though Amtrak has taken on no new debt since June, 2002. From Sept. 2002 to Dec. 2005, total long-term debt declined by \$300 million (from \$3.9 to \$3.6 billion).

- **Working capital/restructuring, \$75 million.**

General Comments

Overall, the request is positive, offering reassurance that the board wants to lay the groundwork for expansion.

The document identifies "two of the key issues" for an Amtrak reauthorization—"establishment of a predictable multi-year capital funding program" and "an end to Amtrak's virtual monopoly on intercity rail service with the introduction of increased competition into the industry to spur efficiency, productivity and performance improvements."

Regarding the second item, Amtrak needs to avoid picking a gratuitous fight with the freight railroads. A key industry goal is that "intercity passenger rail be provided by one entity—Amtrak," and that "Amtrak's right of access, preferential access rates, and operating priority should not be transferred or franchised."

Strategic Investment Initiatives

If federal funding ran \$275 million above Amtrak's "basic" request (itself \$300 million above this year's level), Amtrak recommends the following investments:

- **\$100 million to restructure Amtrak's debt**, some of which has such high interest rates that Amtrak says the restructuring aims "to achieve savings of \$45 million, above the initial \$100 million cost, and a rate of return of 14.8% per year."

- **\$100 million for "state corridor development grants"** which the Federal Railroad Administration could use to match state infrastructure/equipment investments.

- **\$50 million for "network reliability"**, a "capital matching program...[to] augment operating incentive payments to freight railroads...targeted to network chokepoints and linked to better passenger on-time performance...Amtrak, states and FRA, working with...railroads, would...identify the projects and develop" criteria.

- **\$25 million for Americans with Disabilities Act compliance.** [The "basic" request has another \$22 million for this.]

One table (on page 12) at first glance understates Northeast Corridor (NEC) federal funding requirements, which are nearly \$295 million. The reader can only divine that figure by combining these two:

- \$135 million "profit," the only NEC element in the "National Train System" total; and

- \$430 million infrastructure needs—\$69 million operations, \$361 million capital. (Amtrak infrastructure is mostly NEC.)

Funding requirements for the other two "National Train System" elements are:

- non-NEC "state corridor operations"—\$94.2 million operations, \$63 million capital, plus funding from several states;

- long-distance routes—\$438.2 million operations plus \$108 million capital.

The table has an important footnoted message which NARP often has told Amtrak to use more often: "Business line numbers should not be construed as distinct grant requests that can be funded separately; not all business line costs are eliminated if a line is eliminated."

One final note: outcome of a long-distance route review is uncertain. Chairman David Laney "said the plan could include eliminating, restructuring or adding routes. 'There is nothing, as far as I am concerned, off the table,'...Laney also [said] the board probably will not name a new Amtrak president before mid-May, but could consider someone from the airline industry..." (Reuters, Mar. 16). ■

Go to <<http://www.amtrak.com>>, click on "Inside Amtrak" and "Other Reports."

Americans with Disabilities Act: NPRM Issued; Amtrak Speaks; Commuter Rail

The Department of Transportation issued its Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) Feb. 27; comments on most issues are due April 28. [Click on "What's New?" on our website; docket OST-2006-23985 already has an important Federal Railroad Administration staff paper and some public comments.] DOT anticipates amending various regulations, including those on rail station platforms. NARP expects to submit comments.

DOT will clarify what must be done where the maximum, transit-based 3-inch horizontal gap requirement cannot be met. New construction and reconstruction must have full-length, level platform boarding wherever feasible. Where infeasible, another solution (e.g., crank-up lifts, car-borne lifts) is required.

The railroad environment is assumed

to have a normal 6-8" gap (as on the Northeast Corridor) and a *maximum* gap of 10" on tangent track (13" on curves). Persons in wheelchairs—but not ambulatory persons—would need a bridge plate or ramp, whose slope must not exceed 1:8 (at 50% passenger load). DOT asks whether such a slope allows "appropriate opportunity for independent access to cars by wheelchair users," but says a gentler slope might involve "plates or ramps [that are] impractically long."

A bridge plate must be available for every door but a given plate need only be deployed when it will actually be used.

DOT seeks comment on the impact of requiring "level-entry boarding to all cars in a train (e.g., dwell time or headway issues resulting from deployment—particularly manual deployment—of bridge

plates or ramps)."

DOT proposes to ban "mini-high platforms set back from the platform edge" and to require that platform obstructions including stairwells "be set at least 6 feet back from the edge of a platform."

DOT would require new commuter rail cars "to have floor heights identical to those of Amtrak cars [in the same] area,"—15" in the West; mostly 48" East. [The staff paper notes that Sounder and Amtrak Talgo cars have 25" floors.]

DOT proposes to apply platform design requirements only to new rail facilities and systems, but seeks comment on whether the requirements also should apply to alterations to existing intercity and key commuter rail stations.

(continued on page 4)

Amtrak's Grant Request...

...seeks extension of the July 26, 2010, implementation deadline "until at least 5 years after promulgation of final regulations by the Secretary addressing platform requirements." Amtrak says compliance costs could exceed \$200 million.

Commuter Rail

ADA requirements apply to all inter-city passenger rail stations, with limited exceptions (March News), but only to "key" commuter rail stations.

Amtrak rolling stock is compliant, but some commuter rail cars are not. Used, non-compliant equipment released from Chicago is operating in Virginia and Nashville, and planned for Utah. Indeed, some new commuter cars on a couple of systems also may be non-compliant.

Nashville made its cars accessible with short, high-level platforms set back 42" from side of car, meeting freight concerns but needing 6'8" wheelchair bridges. [The NPRM seeks set backs of at least 72". DOT's Sept. guidance requires full-length level boarding at most new stations.]

Utah plans trains consisting of one Bombardier cab car and two or three ex-Chicago cars. The cab car will be fully accessible, with level boarding.

The future of used rolling stock is limited, since rebuilds that add 10 years' life but not ADA compliance are illegal. ■

For more on ADA, see the lengthy article in our March issue. To submit comments, go to <<http://dms.dot.gov>>, click on Comments/Submissions.

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Amtrak Vacations returns—Yankee Holidays began accepting reservations on April 3 and the domain amtrakvacations.com was to be reactivated soon. The previous Amtrak Vacations manager, Private Label Tours, went bankrupt in late 2004.

Missouri Service Changes—Union Pacific will have a massive trackwork project, including some capacity enhancements, on its St. Louis-Kansas City line. From April 1 to Sept. 1, the *Ann Rutledge* and *Mules* have different, slower schedules. Also, buses will substitute for the trains on some days. Check with Amtrak for details.

Starlight Bussing—Metrolink is rebuilding Tunnel 26 (between

Chatsworth and Simi Valley). The work will take place overnight to minimize service disruptions. However, when the southbound *Starlight* is over 2 1/2 hours late (i.e., will not leave Simi Valley by 10 p.m.), the train will terminate in Santa Barbara and passengers will be bussed to Los Angeles. No work will take place on Saturdays.

Spring Timetable—Will be in effect on April 24. No major changes, but due to trackwork, slower schedules are in temporarily in effect on four routes: *Southwest Chief*, *California Zephyr*, *Empire Builder* and *Lake Shore Limited*. Selected trips of the *Zephyr* this summer may detour between Denver and Salt Lake City via Wyoming.

**AAR Honors Amtrak Official**

The Association of American Railroads' North American Environmental Employee Excellence Award went to Amtrak Environmental Health and Safety Vice Pres. Roy Deitchman (l.). AAR Assistant Vice Pres. John Wetzel (r.) presented the award Oct. 26 at AAR's 27th annual Railroad Environmental Conference, at the University of Illinois. Deitchman was honored for using technology to increase environmental awareness. He led development of Amtrak's Environmental Information System—a state-of-the-art, Web-based database with compliance data, facility maps, photos, plans, permits, training, and audit and corrective action information. He also manages a nationwide \$20 million capital program. (Photo: Joe Storch)



National Association of Railroad Passengers

NARP News

Vol. 40, No. 4

April 2006

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; Douglas Kidd, 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>. ©2006 National Assoc. of Railroad Passengers. All rights reserved. Membership dues \$35/year (\$20/under 21, \$25/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 April 6. Vol. 40, No. 3 was mailed second-class March 10.)