

RAILPASSENGERS



WEEKLY HOTLINE

Issue #1,379—January 10, 2025

Starting in February, we are changing the distribution list that we send the Hotline to each and every week. If you want to remain in the know and continue to receive this newsletter - please click the link below and fill out the short form.

Thank you!

[Click Here to Sign Up!](#)

Share your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to issues you may have had on a recent Amtrak trip. Thanks to your support and participation in previous surveys, we have been able to take the passenger's voice straight to Congress and Amtrak Executives. Help us keep hammering the message home by sharing this survey with other passengers!



Association News

More Infrastructure Law Funds Awarded Nationwide

[By Rail Passengers Staff](#)

The Federal Railroad Administration today announced some [\\$1.1 billion in projects to make dangerous rail crossings safer](#), while also unveiling \$146 million in new grant funding that would boost not only Amtrak service but also Connecticut's CT Rail Hartford Line and Brightline's Florida operations.

Funds from the FRA's Restoration & Enhancement grant program will support extending Florida Brightline train consists from five to seven cars by next year, supply enough funding for much of the first three years of newly restored Gulf Coast service, pay for six years of new café car service on Carolina's Piedmont, cover a share of operational costs for the new Amtrak Borealis service for the next six years, and top up support for years three through six of Connecticut's CT Rail regional service on the Hartford Line.

California's LOSSAN corridor also gets support in this round of funding, adding three more roundtrips between Los Angeles and San Diego and effectively restoring the level of service that corridor enjoyed before the COVID pandemic curtailed operations around the country.

A detailed rundown on the R&E grant selections [can be found here](#).

The announcement comes on the same day that the U.S. DOT unveiled [\\$1.1 billion in awards to 123 rail projects in 41 states](#) from the Railroad Crossing Elimination grant program, the largest single investment in grade-crossing safety in the history of the FRA.

The money will build railroad overpasses and underpasses, fund safety upgrades that will save lives, and make improvements that will result in safer communities for pedestrians and motorists as well as rail workers and riders,

DOT says. Building new overpasses and underpasses, in particular, will eliminate the risk of collisions between trains and roadway users and prevent blocked crossings — which delay drivers and emergency responders alike — greatly enhancing safety, mobility, and connectivity for local communities nationwide.

Combined with previous rail investments announced under the Biden-Harris Administration, FRA has now invested a historic \$48.5 billion in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law/Investment in Infrastructure and Jobs Act funding in more than 445 rail projects across the country and Amtrak.

Rail Passengers Association Endorses Rep. Cohen's Food & Beverage Legislation

Rail Passengers Association has endorsed two pieces of legislation introduced by Congressman Steve Cohen (D-TN) targeted at improving the passenger experience onboard Amtrak trains. The Train Furtherance of Outstanding Onboard Dining Act (Train FOOD Act) and the Train Establishment of Appetizing Table Service Act (Train EATS Act) both build on policies Rail Passengers worked with Congressional allies to include in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) of 2021.

"Many of us recall the civility and elegance of a meal in a train dining car. For too long, those days have been a thing of the past," said Rep. Cohen, a senior member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. "But attracting passengers back to passenger train travel requires more than on-time service and a sandwich in a plastic carton. My Train FOOD and Train EATS bills will restore the service the public once expected and still deserves."

"We believe that America's passengers have a right to nutritious, complete food options onboard all trains—regardless of whether they board in Manhattan, New York or Newbern, Tennessee," said Rail Passengers President Jim Mathews. "These two bills identify concrete steps to ensure those rights are met, and we thank Rep. Cohen for his leadership on behalf of the traveling public."

The **Train FOOD Act** would require Amtrak to report annually on its progress toward implementing the Food and Beverage Working Group recommendations (established as part of the IIJA). If Amtrak decides not to implement a recommendation, it must justify that decision to Congress, including a cost estimate if appropriate. The bill also requires a GAO report on implementation status.

The **Train EATS Act** enshrines passenger-friendly practices into law, requiring Amtrak to:

- Allow coach passengers to access traditional (sit-down) dining on a space-available basis;
- Allow passengers to pre-order meals that meet their dietary requirements, as well as healthy meal options based on USDA guidelines; and
- Provide an affordable food option, such as the options currently provided through the café/lounge car.

Amtrak currently adheres to the above best-practices. However, prior Amtrak management limited passenger access to quality onboard food and beverage options, and our association believes this bill is a prudent step to ensure the protection of these rights for passengers in the future.

Field Notes

Advocacy in the Beehive State

[Guest blog](#) from our friends at [The Rio Grande Plan](#)



The Rio Grande Plan is a visionary, citizen-driven initiative first introduced in late 2020 by Salt Lake City residents Christian Lenhart and Cameron Blakely. This ambitious project aims to revitalize the west side of downtown Salt Lake City, with the historic Rio Grande Depot—a landmark rail station—as its focal point. The plan proposes rerouting the railroad tracks currently located on the west side of downtown to a reconstructed alignment along 500 West. As part of this transformation, the tracks would be relocated underground into a below-grade structure known as a "Train Box," enhancing safety, connectivity, and the potential for urban redevelopment.

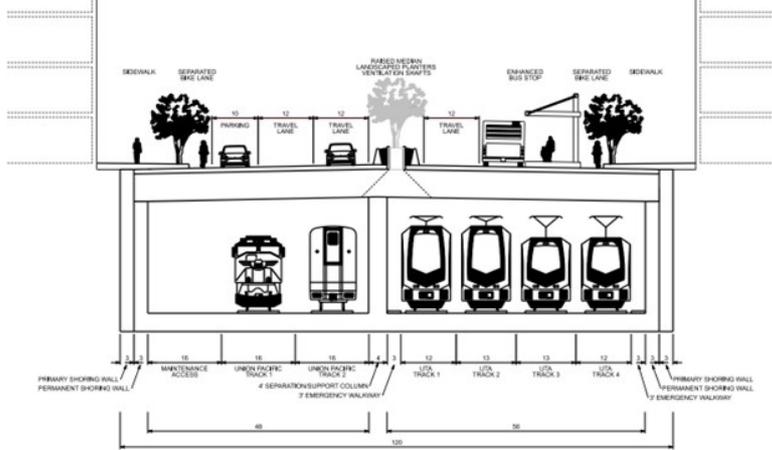


Figure 1 Proposed Original Rio Grande Plan Train Box

A "Train Box" is a below-grade concrete structure designed to house railroad tracks. In this system, rails are laid within the enclosed structure, enabling trains to pass through downtown without disrupting surface-level activity. The Train Box proposed by the Rio Grande Plan would feature six tracks and an adjacent service road for maintenance, accommodating both passenger and freight trains.

Implementing the Rio Grande Plan would eliminate up to eight at-grade crossings in Salt Lake City—sites regularly prone to accidents involving trains and the public. Tragically, since the inception of the Rio Grande Plan, these crossings have been linked to at least eight fatalities. The Train Box aims to significantly improve safety while enhancing the efficiency of rail operations through the city.

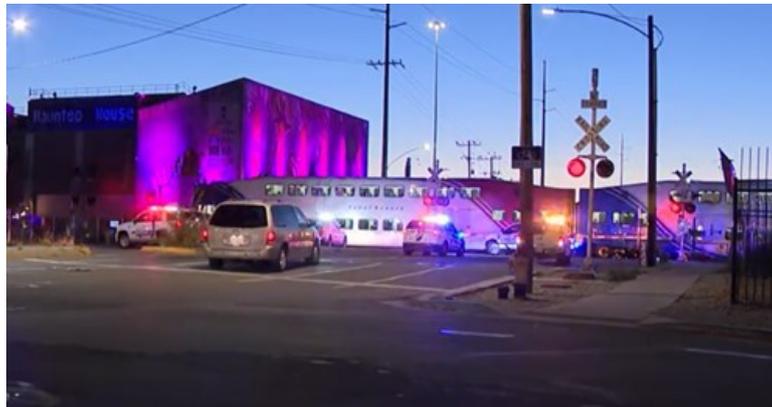


Figure 2 Oct. 30, 2023 Collision Between Cyclist and FrontRunner Commuter Train

The relocation of the railroad tracks as proposed by the Rio Grande Plan would remove a longstanding physical and symbolic barrier between the east and west sides of Salt Lake City—a divide that has persisted since the arrival of the rails in 1870. Salt Lake City's Transportation Division has identified this East/West divide as the "single largest transportation issue in the city." The Rio Grande Plan presents a transformative means to ease this divide.

Recently, Salt Lake City was awarded funding through the federal government's Reconnecting Communities Grant Program to conduct a study of the East/West divide and explore solutions. The Rio Grande Plan stands as the only proposed physical means to address this divide, but public engagement is critical to advocating for its adoption. More information about the Reconnecting Communities Study can be found [here](#).

Beyond easing transportation challenges, the Rio Grande Plan also offers the opportunity to revitalize the historic Rio Grande Depot, a 114-year-old landmark built in 1910 by the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad. Designed to surpass the grandeur of the nearby Union Pacific Depot, the Rio Grande Depot would reclaim its prominence under this plan. Meanwhile, its counterpart, the Union Pacific Depot, was recently repurposed as part of the Asher Adams Hotel. The reuse of the Rio Grande Depot under this plan would breathe new life into the Rio Grande Depot, a cherished piece of Salt Lake City's history.



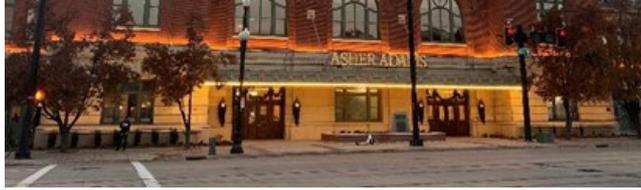


Figure 3 The Asher Adams Hotel (2024)

The Rio Grande Depot has been devoid of rail service since 1999, when the tracks were removed to prepare for the 2002 Winter Olympics. Once home to Utah State offices, the building has remained closed since sustaining damage during the 2020 earthquake. Currently, it is undergoing seismic retrofitting and historic restoration, but its future purpose remains uncertain.

The Rio Grande Plan offers a compelling vision for restoring this historic landmark by transforming it into Utah's Central Station. Under this plan, the depot would once again become a vibrant transportation hub, serving as a unified node for all forms of transit, including Amtrak intercity trains, FrontRunner commuter rail, and TRAX light rail. This initiative would not only preserve the depot's historic significance but also position it as a cornerstone of Utah's modern transportation network.



Figure 4 One of the Last Amtrak Trains Departs the Rio Grande Depot (1999)

Relocating the rails into the newly constructed Train Box would unlock 76+ acres of underutilized land in downtown Salt Lake City, paving the way for transformative redevelopment. This newly available space would enable the creation of a vibrant, transit-oriented "Depot District" in the heart of the city. The district would be centered around the new Central Station, fostering a dynamic environment for homes, businesses, and community spaces. By integrating transit infrastructure with urban development, the Rio Grande Plan would promote sustainable growth and enhance connectivity within Salt Lake City.



Figure 5 The Rio Grande District-Post Rio Grande Plan

Today, the Rio Grande Plan is in the early stages of adoption as an official government proposal. Salt Lake City's Reconnecting Communities study, combined with the completed screening analysis, have positioned the expanded citizen group, Via Rio Grande, into the role of advocates for the plan.

The project's greatest challenge is its estimated cost, which ranges from \$3 to \$5 billion, as determined by a [Screening Analysis](#) conducted by engineering firm Kimley-Horn and funded by Salt Lake City. These financial requirements come at a time when state and federal budgets are under increasing pressure.

To address this challenge, Via Rio Grande has partnered with Utah State University (USU) to conduct an economic impact study on the Rio Grande Plan, which is currently in progress. However, the success of this initiative hinges on active community involvement.

Here's how you can help:

- **Volunteer:** Join the Via Rio Grande Volunteer Corps by reaching out [here](#).

- **Advocate:** Contact state and federal representatives to express your

support for funding this project. Links to do this can be found in Via Rio Grande's [LinkTree](#).

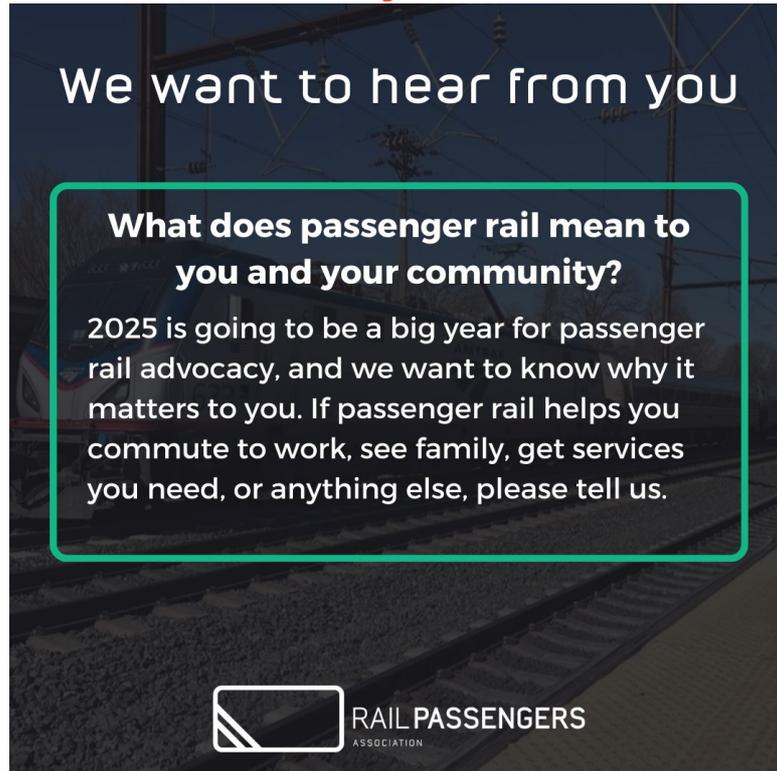
- **Sign:** Support the plan by signing the petition on [org](#).

- **Follow:** Stay updated by following @riograndeplan on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and LinkedIn, or subscribe to Christian Lenhart's [Youtube Channel](#).

What we need most right now is active advocacy; contacting elected officials, engaging with community members, and submitting organizational Letters of Support (examples available [here](#)). This citizen-driven effort can only succeed with the collective support of the community. Together, we can realize this vision in a timely manner and transform downtown Salt Lake City through the Rio Grande Plan.

Please email [Joe Aiello](#) if you have any local, state or regional stories/projects that you would like to see get highlighted in the Hotline.

What's Your Story?



We want to hear from you

What does passenger rail mean to you and your community?

2025 is going to be a big year for passenger rail advocacy, and we want to know why it matters to you. If passenger rail helps you commute to work, see family, get services you need, or anything else, please tell us.



We're gearing up for a big year of advocacy in 2025, and we want your stories to help us connect to elected officials, government agencies, and local advocates on why passenger rail matters.

We want you to tell us what passenger rail means to you and your community. Whether it helps you commute to work, see family and friends, get services you need, or anything else, please tell us.

[Tell Us Your Story!](#)

RAILNATION:DC 2025



RAILNATION: DC 2025

**Regional Summits
& Day on the Hill**

March 24th - April 3rd, 2025

Rail Passengers Office & Conference Room



Come to DC to tell members of Congress **YOUR** passenger-rail story! This year, our Spring RailNation:DC events will expand to include two full weeks

of visits to Capitol Hill, and we need you to stand up and be counted! Visits, along with workshops to help you prepare, will take place over a two-week period from March 24th to April 3rd and will be broken into sessions for nine regions around the country.



March 24th & 25th - Northeast and Mid-Atlantic
March 26th & 27th - Southeast, Southern and South Central
March 31st & April 1st - Midwest
April 2nd & April 3rd - Northwest, Southwest and Mountains/Plains

NOTICE! We have received a number of emails from registrants who have been confused by the date listed on the confirmation email. The system we use is defaulting to the first day of the regional sessions, which is March 24th. We are working with the CRM team to correct this, but for now - if you have registered for any of the other dates, those are the dates you attend in DC. Please email our Director of Community Engagement & Organizing, Joe Aiello at jaiello@narprrail.org if you have any further questions.

REGISTER HERE!

Registration ends at midnight eastern on March 14th, 2025

Hotline Links

A curated selection of passenger rail and transportation stories from this week. Check out our social media feeds on [Twitter](#) & [Facebook](#) to read breaking news and join the conversation!

- [Gulf Coast Rail Receives \\$21 Million in Grant Funding, U.S. Senator Roger Wicker](#)

Good news out of the Gulf Coast as we get closer to revenue service!

- [Senator Baldwin Helps Secure Over \\$38 Million Investment in Wisconsin Commuter Rail Service, U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin](#)

The funds, from the USDOT's Restoration and Enhancement Grants Program, will help support Amtrak's Borealis through year six of service with the states matching through non-program matches.

- [Normal mayor talks about future of water rates, train travel, WGLT](#)

Normal (IL) Mayor Chris Koos, who currently sits on the Amtrak Board of Directors, talks about the current state of Amtrak and state-supported routes - and what it could mean for the future of expansion through Central Illinois.

- [Twelve rail-related projects in California among those to receive federal grants, Trains](#)

\$258 million in federal funds through various grant programs will go a long way to undoing the "historical barriers" created by the highway program by giving the state a chance to "create a safer, cleaner commute for millions of Californians".

- [A Commuting Resolution for 2025: Ride Your Local Subway or Bus, Bloomberg](#)

What is your transit resolution for the new year?

- [Trump names former Pan Am Railways president David Fink to be FRA administrator, Trains](#)

ICYMI: The incoming administration has made their pick to head up the FRA

- [Local opinion: ADOT's passenger rail plan doesn't track, Arizona Daily Star](#)

Arizona Daily Star opinion piece on the high-speed needs for the Phoenix to Tucson corridor.

- [Aviation industry faces a slew of challenges insiders say will take years to resolve](#), CNBC

It is long past time for the public transit/passenger rail world to step up and compete.

- [City of Chicago Completes Accessibility Improvements at Over 100 CTA Bus Stops in 2024](#), Chicago.gov

All public transit is important to our cause, as we advocate for better first/last mile connections to get you to and from the train station. Chicago had a very busy 2024 on this front.



[WE ARE NOW ON BLUE SKY!](#)

If you aren't following Rail Passengers on social media, you should be! We are covering all the breaking news America's passengers need to stay informed on local, regional, and national issues.

Upcoming Events

- [RIARP Winter Meeting](#)
Monday, January 27, 5:30p
- [RailNation: DC 2025](#)
March 24 - April 3

Please contact Joe Aiello (jaiello@narprail.org) to have a local, state or regional meeting added to the Rail Passengers calendar (print and on-line) of upcoming events!

Staff Updates

Your staff is at the table, in the field, having the conversations that make a difference for passengers across the country. Learn what they're up to each week and how you can support your Association's key missions!

- **Jim Mathews, President & CEO**, began the week catching up with congressional offices and continuing to work on Rail Passengers' filing before the Surface Transportation Board on the Union Pacific late trains case. In addition, Jim this week submitted his agenda for his first Amtrak customer-experience meeting of the year taking place next week (regular check-ins once or twice each month with Amtrak leadership). He also prepared for meetings next week with potential corporate partners and regional policy and rail-development leaders.
- **Sean Jeans Gail, Vice President of Policy**, spent the week working with Congressional offices on developing [rail-focused legislation](#). He also drafted a 2025 policy look-ahead for a Rail Passengers' Council of Representatives briefing, which will be held next week.
- **Jonsie Stone, Chief of Staff**, spent the week responding to member/donor inquiries, processing membership dues and donations sent to the DC office, and tending to the operational and administrative needs of the Association.
- **Joe Aiello, Director of Community Engagement & Organizing**, has been catching up with emails and messages from members and supporters from over the holiday break. Joe is also gearing up for a number of happenings going down next week, as well as preparing to help plan the regional workshops taking place for this year's RailNation: DC



Rail Passengers Webinar Series

Miss out on our past events? You can watch them on our [YouTube channel](#) or through our website at railpassengers.org/webinars





Holiday Merch Drop!

OUR ICONIC STATEMENT

For years, the "I'd Rather Be On The Train" bumper sticker was a favorite among our members, with many requesting extras, so they could share with their family & friends. Over time, one of the most asked questions whenever we are in the field has been if we are ever going to bring that sticker back (one day!).

We are, **ONCE AGAIN**, dusting off this classic statement for our holiday merch drop - and this year, with a well known historic twist,

Just as with past holiday designs, this offering is limited, so get your orders in now!

****Do you own Association gear? Show us your selfies and let us know what products you want to see next! Contact [Joe Aiello](#) for merch information and questions about our products.****



Rail Passengers Timetables

Updated 1/9/2025

Thanks to a collaborative effort between Rail Passengers NYS Council Member Nathanael Nerode & [juckins.net](#)'s Chris Juckins, we have been able to completely update our timetables resource page.

[CLICK HERE](#)

LOOKING FOR SMARTER
WAYS TO DONATE?



MAKING A CONTRIBUTION
HAS NEVER BEEN EASIER!

Do more with your donations. If you have questions about employer match, gifting a membership, or other questions about how to make a bigger impact, let us know! Your staff is here to help with:

- Online Donations
- Donor Advised Funds
- Employer Match

- RPA Signature Visa Card
- Gift of Membership
- and More!

With multiple secure, protected methods of payment, you have more flexibility in the way dues are paid. Skip the hassle and [contact us](#) today for help setting up automatic or online payments.

- Setup ACH or E-Check with your bank of choice
- Use a Debit or Credit Card to pay online, or
- Send a check to 1200 G Street NW Suite 520 Washington, DC 20005

Other Ways to Make an Impact this Holiday Season

Did you know that individual donors make up more than two-thirds (67%) of charitable giving in the U.S., and that many of those donations are made in the last two months of the year? As you make your year-end giving plans, please consider a contribution to Rail Passengers Association using the methods below – making a meaningful difference for passenger rail in the U.S. while maximizing your tax advantages and fulfilling minimum retirement withdrawal requirements.

Donor Advised Fund (DAF)

Donor-advised funds are the fastest-growing charitable giving vehicle in the United States because they are one of the easiest and most tax-advantageous ways to give to charity. [Click here](#) to learn more and consult with your financial advisor to determine if establishing a Donor Advised Fund is right for you.

Required Minimum Distribution (RMD)

Required Minimum Distributions (RMDs) are minimum amounts that IRA and retirement plan account owners generally must withdraw annually starting with the year they reach age 73. [Click here](#) to learn more about RMDs and consult with your financial advisor to determine if an RMD is right for you.

Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD)

A Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD) is a direct transfer of assets from an IRA to a qualified charity. QCDs are a popular way for Americans 70 ½ years or older to donate to charity while also satisfying their RMDs. [Click here](#) to learn more about QCDs and consult with your financial advisor to determine if a QCD is right for you.

Member & Donor Notices

- **The Rail Passengers Association is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. Our federal tax identification number is 36-2615221**
- **To help facilitate dissemination of electronic thank you receipts,** please make sure your contact information, **specifically your email address,** is up-to-date in your Neon profile.
- **If you need assistance with your membership,** please call the Office at 202-408-8362.
- **While our staff continues to work remotely, we are unable to provide permanent membership cards.** You can print a temporary membership card by creating an account at www.railpassengers.org (select "My Account" on the homepage).
- **Complete all information!** -- Before sealing your envelope, PLEASE double-check the credit card information on the buck slip!
 - Print credit card information clearly.
 - **Include an expiration date, month and year, as well as the CVV number.**
 - Without **COMPLETE** information, your membership renewal or donation can't be processed.
- **If you have your financial institution send a check on your behalf,** without a buckslip, PLEASE instruct them to add:
 - a notation in the memo field if the payment is for membership dues or a donation, AND,
 - your Rail Passengers Association member ID. If we have multiple members with the same name, i.e., John Smith, it can be hard to identify the correct member to attribute the payment, without the member ID.





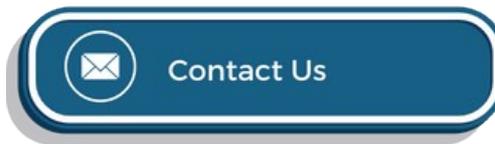
Rail Passengers Association members have access to a full service, nationwide federal credit union with extensive product and service offerings. Signature FCU is the exclusive provider of the [Rail Passengers Association-branded Visa credit card](#) with our logo, which supports our work by giving back to our organization, and gives you 1 point for every \$1 you spend to redeem for travel and merchandise. The card has no annual fee, no balance transfer fees, no foreign transaction fees, and has a very low interest rate.



Rail Passengers Association Earns Coveted 4-Star Rating from Charity Navigator

Rail Passengers Association's strong financial health and commitment to accountability and transparency have earned it a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator, America's largest independent charity evaluator. Our Charity Navigator profile can be found by clicking [here](#).

If you have questions, feedback, or submissions for next week's hotline, send us your thoughts! Help us spread the word about your local, regional, and national passenger rail wins.



THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS:



RAIL PASSENGERS

EST. 1967

Rail Passengers Association
1200 G St. NW
Suite 520
Washington, DC 20005

P 202.408.8362
F 202.408.8287

www.railpassengers.org