

SWEEP IN CONGRESS MAY HELP RAIL

by **Randell Hansen**
TRAC Treasurer

The November 7 landslide in Congress, though arguably a result of foreign policy, changed the domestic lay of the land for transportation funding. The new Speaker of the House is San Francisco's Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), with Steny Hoyer (D-MD) as Majority Leader and James Clyburn (D-SC) Majority Whip. John Boehner (R-OH) is the new Minority Leader and Roy Blunt (R-MO) Minority Whip.

On the Senate side Harry Reid (D-NV) is Majority Leader and Dick Durbin (D-IL) Assistant Majority Leader. Mitch McConnell (R-KY) became Minority Leader with Trent Lott (R-MS) as Minority Whip.

The Capitol Hill changes also meant committee reassignments that affect the funding for Amtrak and other transportation programs.

In the House of Representatives, the Transportation & Infrastructure (T&I) Committee is chaired by Jim Oberstar (D-MN), who said he wants to see more funding for Amtrak as well as high-speed rail in the Midwest. Oberstar has also worked well with Steven LaTourette (R-OH) the past couple of sessions in securing additional funding for Amtrak.

LaTourette became the ranking member on the T&I Railroads subcommittee with Corrine Brown (D-FL). However, the Vice-Chair of the T&I Committee is John Mica (R-FL), a long-time Amtrak critic who has referred to it as a "Soviet-style railroad" and has denounced former CEO David Gunn's progress of having Amtrak carry more passengers with fewer employees.

Amtrak supporter John Olver (D-MA) became chair of the House Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee with Joe Knollenberg (R-MI) as ranking member. Last year, Knollenberg slipped language into the appropriations bill that prohibited Amtrak

from discounting tickets over 50% as well as requiring it to haul more perishable foods with ExpressTrak cars. The New York Times revealed that one of Knollenberg's big contributors was the President of the company that makes the ExpressTrak cars. Even though the ExpressTrak provision was later repealed, the discount limit has remained in effect.

Unfortunately, pro-rail Members of Congress Nancy Johnson (R-CT) and John Sweeney (R-NY) lost re-election. But Christopher Shays (R-CT) narrowly won. Also gone is Ernest Istook (R-OK) who chaired the subcommittee on Treasury, Transportation, and Special Agencies. In 2004 he took the extreme measure of cutting funding for local transportation projects in the districts of 21 Republicans who had broken ranks and supported a \$1.8 billion funding level for Amtrak. Istook gave up his House seat to run for governor where he lost by 33.5% - 66.5% against incumbent Brad Henry.

Senate Majority Leader Reid has long supported Amtrak and has also been trying to get rail service restored to his Las Vegas constituency by securing funds for studies on high-speed rail as well as a maglev project. Sen. Durbin has been trying to get Amtrak service restored to Rockford, IL and last fall he stepped in when Canadian National tried to back out of its agreement to allow additional Amtrak service in Illinois.

The Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, is now headed by Daniel Inouye (D-HI) and Ted Stevens (R-AK). Other pro-Amtrak senators who chair committees are: Kent Conrad (D-ND) of the Budget Committee, Chris Dodd (D-CT) heads the Senate Banking Committee, which has jurisdiction over financial institutions as well as mass transit. Sen. Robert Byrd (D-WV) chairs the Senate Appropriations Committee and Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) chairs the Appropriations Transportation

Subcommittee.

Also in the 2006 election, voters returned pro-Amtrak Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) and Trent Lott (R-MS) to the Senate. Sen. Lott co-authored the bipartisan S. 1516 with Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) which would fund Amtrak with \$11.4 billion through Fiscal Year 2011. However, pro-Amtrak incumbent Senators Rick Santorum (R-PA), Conrad Burns (R-MT), Mike DeWine (R-OH), and Lincoln Chafee (R-RI) all lost.

Based on who now chairs the committees, the new environment for Amtrak looks encouraging, but because of the loss of some strong Republican supporters of Amtrak, nothing is guaranteed. Elected officials still need to be informed and reminded that the majority of Americans want more, not less passenger rail due to growing concerns about gas prices, dependence on foreign oil, congestion, and poor air quality.

January Update

In the first week of the new session, Sen. Ted Stevens (R-AK), Vice Chair of the Commerce, Science & Transportation Committee, joined Chair Daniel Inouye (D-HI) to introduce legislation to improve security on rail, bus, and other modes.

The bill would make the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) lead agency in the area and authorize a total of \$1.25 billion for TSA over the next three years. Following attacks on passenger trains in Madrid, Spain, and train accidents in the U.S., rail security vulnerabilities receive particular attention under this legislation. The bill requires TSA to conduct a railroad sector threat assessment and submit prioritized recommendations for improving rail security.

The legislation would also provide grants through TSA to Amtrak, freight railroads, and others to upgrade security. It also contains earmarks of DOT funds for safety enhancements to Amtrak railroad tunnels in New York, Washington, and Baltimore.

Southern California Rail Briefing

by **Numan Parada**

The American Public Transportation Association (APTA) awarded the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro) the 2006 Outstanding Public Transportation Award at its annual meeting in San Jose. "Metro has aggressively added new service, including additional freeway express buses and the wildly successful Metro Orange Line," while keeping costs low, according to the APTA. As a result, Metro has been conferred labels on its buses and website designating the agency as "America's Best."

The U.S. House of Representatives passed a repeal of a law prohibiting federal funds for the construction of the Purple Line down Wilshire Boulevard on September 20. Rep. Henry Waxman wrote H.R. 4653 to undo a ban he wrote 20 years ago due to safety concerns. Waxman had a change of heart when he learned that new technologies would make tunneling safer. The bill awaits a vote by the U.S. Senate in 2007 and signature by the President.

Also, one of the two tunnel boring machines digging the tunnels for the Eastside Gold Line, nicknamed "Lola", completed its work on Thursday, November 16. The second tunnel boring machine, nicknamed "Vicki", achieved breakthrough on December 9.

Bart Reed, executive director of The Transit Coalition, continued his transit advocacy work by speaking to members of the North Valley Democratic Club, which is based in the San Fernando Valley. Reed discussed the importance of upgrading

Metrolink service in the area with increased frequency, extended hours and a new line to Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) and the South Bay.

Connecting the Metro Green Line to LAX was the subject of a meeting between transit advocates and the LAX Area Advisory Committee. Bart Reed presented Committee members various ideas to improve transit access, with the goal of extending the Green Line 2.4 miles north to the rental car areas and installing a people mover between the Green Line and the terminals. In October, the Los Angeles City Council approved studying a Green Line extension that would connect with the Expo Line in the Westside.

Rail advocates orchestrated a Rail Customer Conference with Metro to discuss various improvements completed and in progress on Tuesday, October 24. Rail Operations representatives discussed the new 2550 light rail cars that are capable of running on all three Los Angeles light rail lines, major communications upgrades, safety issues on the Blue Line, speed issues on the Gold Line and connectivity with the Red Line.

Rail advocates also participated at a Beverly Hills Mass Transit Committee town hall meeting on November 2. The ad hoc committee discussed four possible alignments for a speculative subway extension through their city but ultimately suggested an alignment under Wilshire Blvd., with stops at Beverly Dr. and La Cienega Blvd.

The popularity of the Waterfront Red Car Line in San Pedro is moving officials to study practical extensions of the streetcar.

Possible extensions include south to Cabrillo Beach, north to Wilmington and west into Downtown San Pedro, as well as a spur into the Ports O'Call Village.

In September, the San Diego Association of Governments voted to devote up to \$18 million in local funds to keep the Oceanside-Escondido Sprinter project moving, in lieu of delayed federal funds. Critics contend that the North County Transit District (NCTD), which oversees Sprinter construction, is not doing enough to stem rising costs. Also, two Diesel Multiple Unit (DMU) trains ran on the track of the future Sprinter line for the first time on Saturday, October 28, mainly to ensure that its computer systems would accurately record train movements.

The Orange County Transportation Authority Board recently approved spending \$7 million to study a high-speed rail line connecting Los Angeles with Anaheim. The rail line would connect with the proposed California high-speed rail system and whisk passengers end-to-end in less than 20 minutes. The Orange County Transportation Authority Board previously approved \$22.5 million to purchase nearly 14 acres in Anaheim for a new transit hub that would serve the proposed line. Local bus, Metrolink and Amtrak service will be moved to the new station by 2010.

This article appears courtesy of the Transit Coalition, a Southern California based non-profit organization working on land use and transportation mobility issues. Numan Parada is Communications Director. More info: www.transitcoalition.org