

Calls for Amtrak Reform Gather

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Three operating organization scenarios were studied, but ARC voted to endorse #3:

- 1 national or regional monopolies
- 2 long haul [only] competition
- 3 competition for all intercity markets (with a 2-5 year transition).

The ARC approved amendments to option 3 requiring the new Amtrak to let workers "follow" their jobs in seniority order, with existing contracts intact, and have Railway Labor Act bargaining to follow expiration of contracts. Also, "franchising" in Option 3 becomes optional (blurring the distinction between options 1 and 3).

The Council's vote in favor of Option 3 was 8-1-1, with labor representative Charles Money Penny voting no, and Democratic appointee James Coston abstaining. Coston has been vocally critical of both Amtrak's financial dealings and the ARC's sometimes antidemocratic staff actions. At December's meeting, Coston said ARC had undermined its credibility by rushing the decision.

Option 3 makes the Federal government responsible for long haul trains, but after the transition period, states become responsible for losses on existing and new corridor trains. The ARC sketchy recommendations include "Train operators responsible for privately financing new equipment. If necessary, federal funding of long-haul equipment and state financing of corridor equipment."

The ARC announced a vote on February 7, the deadline for the Council's advisory recommendation to Congress. Additional detail will be developed by ARC staff and a teleconference may happen before then.

Milwaukee Mayor and ARC Member John Norquist pitched the Council to recommend availability of highway and aviation trust funds for passenger rail. Norquist believes that Congress might not decide to change Amtrak's structure but almost certainly wants to change funding methods.

The National Association of Railroad Passengers (NARP) focussed on potential funding threats in the ARC proposals. NARP criticized Federal spending of "\$13 billion a year on aviation, \$33 billion on highways, and only about \$570 million on passenger rail. At the same time, the federal government offers states 80% matches for most road and aviation projects, but no match for most intercity passenger rail projects."

"Addressing this inequity," says NARP, "is the key to developing attractive, affordable ... service the public will embrace." NARP also notably said, "Amtrak must be clear about the ongoing costs of maintaining and improving the existing network. This clarity must include outlining the funds needed for operating grants, not just capital investment." Warrington's use of capital assets to cover operations precipitated the ARC storm.



Acela Express on its first day of operation near Philadelphia. Photo courtesy trainweb.com

With "operational self-sufficiency" gone as a promise, some in Congress may favor ending funding altogether to avoid pouring money down a black hole. Ross Capon of NARP told both the press and the ARC that methods of insuring "value for money" and credible incentives for Amtrak to perform are more useful than restructuring ideas.

NARP says, "separating operations from infrastructure does not magically create ... funding... and a meaningful federal-state funding partnership, nor does it create the will to provide those things." NARP fears that splitting Amtrak into an operating unit needing grants mostly for non-Northeast trains, and an infrastructure unit needing capital grants for the Northeast, threatens to break apart the consensus for a passenger-rail network with national reach. NARP questions whether a Congressional majority will exist for either Amtrak remnant.

In its January 10 letter to ARC, States for Passenger Rail Coalition (SPRC) conveyed its belief that the "success of a rail corridor structure will be severely limited if the corridors are not connected by a national system framework."

"The states believe that regional corridors offer the best opportunity for passenger rail development in the United States.

However, a series of unconnected corridors, while serving regional needs, will not form a coherent, national system. Connectivity has been the basis of success for the interstate highway system and, as the events of September 11 have so clearly demonstrated, the security and resilience of our national transportation system require that such connectivity and redundancy exist within and between modes. A national intercity rail network should be supported by the federal government, as the federal government has supported such investment and operation of the interstate highway, aviation, and maritime systems."

NARP also directly attacked the ARC idea that states bear more of the cost of providing passenger rail, saying it "is likely to mean major service reductions" due to major budget problems at the state level. "Such reductions are inappropriate," said NARP, "at a time when Amtrak has been gaining market share from the airlines and the public is demanding more, not less, service."

Some state governments are interested in the ARC idea of granting them franchised access to tracks, partly to keep state service payments at fair levels. Amtrak is notorious for its wildly varying pricing, ranging from \$7 to \$40 per train mile for different states.

Acela Places 9th in Rail Olympics

This table lists the top 12 countries, ranked by fastest stop-to-start times for scheduled services. Data is based on a speed survey published in 1999 by *Railway Gazette International*, updated by CRN with 2001 timings from European on-line timetables and other sources. RGI plans a new survey, so visit www.railwaygazette.com to subscribe. California, the world's 6th largest economy, is off the chart about 18th in speeds, about Morocco's level.

Rank/Country	Train	From-To	Distance (miles)	Time (min)	Average Speed (mph)
1 Japan	Nozumi	Hiroshima-Kokura	119.0	44	162.3
2 France	TGV	St. Pierre des Corps-Massy	126.1	51	148.4
3 Belgium-Intl.	Thalys	Brussels Midi-Paris Nord	174.6	80	130.9
4 Spain	AVE	Madrid-Seville	291.7	135	129.6
5 Germany	ICE	Fulda-Würzburg	57.8	29	119.6
6 Britain	IC225	London-York	188.0	101	111.7
7 Sweden	X2000	Skövde-Södertälje Syd	171.7	96	107.3
8 Italy	Eurostar	Piacenza-Parma	35.3	20	106.0
9 U.S.A.	Acela	Baltimore-Wilmington	68.3	40	102.4
10 Finland	Pendolino	Salo-Karjaa	32.9	21	94.1
11 China	Fex G	Guangzhou-Shenzhen	86.2	55	94.0
12 Russia	Sokol	Moskva-St. Peterburg	403.0	270	89.6