

Amtrak Network at a Turning Point

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The January issue of CRN reported extensively on the bitter battle between the Bush Administration and members of Congress in the aftermath of the Amtrak Board's firing of Amtrak President David Gunn.

David Laney, Amtrak Board Chairman, now has the ball in so far as the future of Amtrak is concerned, and many are waiting to see how he will ensure the continued viability of America's long distance train services. It can be hoped that the reconstituted Amtrak Board will proceed generally in accordance with the following:

1) Amtrak, however organized, has an obligation to preserve and enhance America's system of long distance passenger trains, which will become increasingly popular and important as the era of ultra cheap energy draws to a close.

2) If splitting off the Northeast Corridor

operation means better utilization of resources and more transparency, so be it. Whatever the arrangement, it is vital that Northeast Corridor trains, as well as all other long distance passenger trains, be operated efficiently and effectively.

3) In some circles, the term "privatization" has achieved the high status of being politically correct. For this reason privatization is sometimes advanced as a way of improving America's passenger rail services. In fact, privatization is no panacea and depending upon the situation can be either an effective way of marshalling resources or a disaster. From the standpoint of the public interest the overall success rate of the various privatization schemes attempted over the last 25 years has been lackluster at best. For this reason, any movement toward privatizing rail services should proceed with caution. There are a number of ways Amtrak could test the waters before fully becoming fully committed to privatization. For instance it could turn over the opera-

tion of a single line to a private operator under a one-year contract with incentives to meet pre-determined safety, reliability, average speed, passenger comfort, revenue and cost-control standards. If the operator succeeded the contract could be renewed for up to say, three times. If the approach worked, it could be broadened to include other lines.

4) Amtrak should strongly resist and rebut those who seek to discredit passenger rail travel on grounds that it does not pay for itself. It is true that Amtrak has been unable to raise fares sufficiently to cover costs. This is due in large part to the artificially low costs of driving and flying created by the hundreds of billions of dollars of public subsidy lavished upon roadway users and airline travelers every year.

Under the circumstances it is not unreasonable to ask that America's long distance train operator receive the funding it needs to run its passenger trains.

JERRY BROWN TOUTS HIGH SPEED RAIL WHILE GOV. CANDIDATES SILENT ON ISSUE

At the March 22 High Speed Rail Authority meeting in Oakland, Democratic Attorney General candidate Jerry Brown had some acerbic remarks about high speed rail. Notably, the best case he made for high speed rail was that California is already wasting billions on a public works scam that has no purpose. Here are his remarks, transcribed as best as was possible:

Just a very brief welcome to Oakland, where hopefully the high-speed rail will speed through in my lifetime, so that doesn't give you that long (laughter).

Anyway I think it's very important to know that the reception in Sacramento hasn't always been in recent times what it should be. With all those hundreds of billions it is pretty clear to me that California ought to get on the pay wagon with high-speed rail. It's quite obvious, it happens I've been on high-speed rail in France and in Japan, and for the life of me I can't figure out why we can't get it done [here in California].

Airports are getting difficult to build, they do cause their own problems. So somehow we'll just have to find the money. And since they are throwing out the number 'two-hundred billion' for something as vague as 'infrastructure', somehow we ought to be able to come up with thirty-five billion dollars for rail. That doesn't sound like too much.

Hell the bridge is going to cost seven [billion], and its not going to add one inch of space; the same five lanes. Seven billion for just not falling in the water ...I guess that's pretty important, not to collapse (laughter)...but it's not going to speed anybody across the Bay.

The rail (unintelligible) is big, I think will be very important land use wise and program development and intelligence-wise. And unfortunately it's going to cost a lot of money. But if you look at what they did over there in Washington, they blew \$300 billion in the last three years based on false information.

So it seems to me we could come up with a tenth of that for a great high-speed rail program. That's why I support, that's why I'm glad to see so many people here who are soldiering on in the face of a certain amount of ...what? ... a certain amount of 'non-excitement' in

some of the quarters in Sacramento.

Well, I'll be there soon and I'm going to light a fire under them, because I need high-speed rail. The Attorney General has offices in LA, San Francisco, Fresno, Oakland and Sacramento (laughter) and I don't want to have to fly. So, we've got to get it going.

Gubernatorial candidates have been notably silent on the issue, although there was a recent moderation of Phil Angelides' recusal from the issue, imposed in February 2004 after he noted he had conflicts regarding property holdings near a station:

According to an assistant policy analyst on his campaign staff, the following is his current standard response:

Phil Angelides was a strong supporter of the 2002 high-speed rail bond measure, comparing high speed rail with the investments in the state water project and the university system.

"With our state projected to grow by over 12 million residents in the next 20 years, we must once again commit ourselves to investing in the infrastructure required to maintain our quality of life and our economic strength," said Angelides.

As Governor, Phil will work tirelessly to improve the quality of life for all Californians. In his Clean California plan, Phil outlines a series of bold actions he will take to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, while investing in clean technology and renewable energy.

This plan will invest in clean technologies and give all Californians the opportunity use clean fuels. Phil Angelides will put in place smart growth policies that reduce sprawl and give incentives to communities to build transit-friendly, walkable neighborhoods that are better for our air and water.

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has in the past spoken against the high speed rail bond, but does not have a policy position regarding the high-speed rail project, according to his campaign. He has supported full funding of the conventional rail programs, including new intercity cars in his version of the budget, items that seem to now be off the table, due to raids of the PTA account for other purposes.

Schwarzenegger also asked for legislation to take the high-speed rail initiative off the 2006 ballot, but his reasoning was that the project was not ready for funding. Many rail supporters would agree with that position, since the measure is likely to fail without an organized campaign.

Controller Steve Westly's campaign released the following after a CRN inquiry: "He supports in concept the Bullet Line to link Northern California to Southern California, provided the state can work out an efficient and accountable way to pay for the project, the route is environmentally sound and it encourages smart growth."

In sum, there appears to be no candidate for statewide office except Jerry Brown who is actively promoting rail as a solution to California's energy problems.

SUBWAY® FOOD PROJECT WITH AMTRAK TUBED

The much-vaunted Amtrak project to test feasibility of franchise food operations on its trains took months of planning but lasted only a few days. Responding to customer requests as well as legislative direction, Amtrak teamed with the Subway® restaurant chain to examine whether a popular franchise offering soups, salads, sandwiches and pizzas on board local trains could produce a favorable financial result.

The pilot project on New York-Albany trains which lacked food service began on November 17. Days later, labor protests by the union that represents Amtrak on-board service employees shut the service down.

Under the experimental four-month arrangement, Subway was to lease café car space from Amtrak. Two to three Subway employees were to prepare the food off-train at New York and Albany, load them onto the trains, and sell the food both from café cars and with at-seat service.

Poor financial results of food service operated by Amtrak caused New York to seek elimination of food service on local New York-Albany trains last July as part of a cost-cutting campaign. There is currently no food service offered on these trains