

A Parting Shot: Threat to Western Long Hauls

Coast Observations

By Alan C. Miller
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More than any other single issue, I am asked by our membership about the Amtrak national situation. We are truly at a crossroads with Amtrak. Should Congress listen to the Amtrak Reform Council (ARC), Amtrak as we know it could be dismantled; the outcome of this we could only guess at.

On the other hand, Senator Hollings has introduced legislation which specifically names Amtrak as an essential part of our national defense, citing the ability to move people in the wake of an incident such as September 11, 2001. Hollings' bill (S. 1991) specifically protects long-distance trains as an essential part of the national system (\$580 million/year).

Long distance trains feed our short-distance trains, and the loss of Amtrak would mean California taking on the full cost of shared facilities. Our four long-distance trains also serve as the only intercity rail link for numerous California towns such as Paso Robles, Salinas, Chico, Redding, Dunsmuir, Colfax, Truckee, San Bernardino, Victorville, Barstow, Needles, Pomona, Ontario and Palm Springs. These trains feed connecting passengers to all California corridor trains and are used by Californians to travel within and outside the state as well as by visitors to California. They have lost ridership due to reduced capacity, not reduced demand.

Attacks on long-distance trains are nothing new to those of us in the rail advocacy arena, but it has been several years since a serious threat has arisen; the system has changed but remained national. This attack on the national network is unlike any we have seen before, and the largest threat seems to be coming from the attitude of Amtrak's current upper management.

Amtrak's attitude in the February 1 press release appeared suicidal. Warrington had already angered Congress by mortgaging Penn Station to pay daily expenses, and withheld requested accounting statistics from the Amtrak Reform Council. For the past several years Warrington has stated that Amtrak is on a 'glide-path' to operational self-sufficiency. With the deadline of Oct 1, 2002 approaching, he did a 'one-eighty' and stated that this will not be achieved. Warrington should have pointed this out to Congress years ago instead of waiting until 2002 to ask whether Congress wants Amtrak to make money, or provide a national service. A good point, years late.

In the past, Amtrak has threatened trains with discontinuance to rally national support. Amtrak works because most states have trains and trains are popular with constituents. A national system gets national support, so most members of Congress want to keep Amtrak. But this time, Amtrak publicly asked for \$1.2 billion, which made it appear to the uninformed to be a doubling of their annual operating budget.

Warrington broke this request into \$700 million for capital funding, \$300 million for railroad retirement and interest expenses, and \$200 for "money losing long-distance trains." In fact, little more than 10% of Amtrak's \$1.2 billion request is for long-distance trains. Warrington attacked long-haul trains as being the money loser, as if short and medium distance trains and the NE Corridor actually have an operating profit. This ill-conceived strategy could accelerate the dismantling of Amtrak's network and erode congressional support.

Amtrak's testimony before the House Appropriations Subcommittee that so-called

profitable routes were subsidizing other train routes, is no longer taken as fact by key senators. The view of U.S. Senator Patty Murray of Washington State and chair of the Senate Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee is "there are [no] Amtrak routes that make a profit... whether it is in the Northeast Corridor or anywhere else in the nation."

Murray's portrayal of the budget crisis situation: "Amtrak appears to be taking a bunch of trains hostage and telling a majority of Senators—'you either boost our funding by 130 percent or we kill your rail service'" is devastatingly on-target.

With Warrington gone, we may be able to retain and improve the Amtrak structure, instead of an unknown future with privatization. The United Rail Passenger Alliance has been issuing press releases praising the fact that the long-awaited debate on the structure of Amtrak has finally begun. But has URPA considered that the final outcome may be no more national train system?

Divide and conquer is one of the most effective ways to win a war; we must be united to keep the Amtrak structure as-is with needed improvements, not just throw all the cards on the table and hope for the best. "Don't toss out what you have unless you first have something better to replace it with," points out NARP Vice-President and TRAC member George Chilson.

The Train Riders Association of California fully supports retention of the national Amtrak system. TRAC rejects the Amtrak Reform Council's plan to break Amtrak into separate agencies.

We recognize that Amtrak's financial difficulties must be largely blamed on those members of Congress who demanded the company be profitable operationally, then withheld the capital funds that were needed to achieve this goal. Congress must release these capital funds and expand intercity rail service throughout the nation.

A Great Choice

David Gunn, named Amtrak's new President on April 26, is no apologist for poor performance. He has a reputation for tackling huge and intimidating challenges like the reform of the New York City Transit Authority at a time when the subway network looked hopeless. Gunn has far better grasp of technical issues than Amtrak's last two presidents, and is more politically savvy.

Gunn's first official comments were, "I have always been a proponent of a strong national passenger rail network, While we face substantial financial and physical challenges, I'm convinced that by securing adequate operational and capital funding, we will be able to rebuild our plant and equipment in an effective and efficient manner, and continue to provide a high-quality service to the traveling public. I'm looking forward to joining Amtrak."

Gunn most recently served as Chief General Manager at the Toronto Transit Commission from 1995 until 1999. Before that, he ran Washington's WMATA and worked for three proud passenger roads, the Illinois Central Gulf Railroad, the New York Central and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad in 1964-1967 at the beginning of his career. His hiring appears to indicate that the Bush Administration wants to try to make Amtrak work, not shut it down.

CREDIT SENATOR JIM COSTA putting direct pressure on Union Pacific for the breakthrough in getting the new 6th San Joaquin running. If not for the political push, the train could have been permanently blockaded by UP like Amtrak's Las Vegas service... OFF TO A BETTER JOB IN NEW JERSEY goes George Warrington. Some insiders say he was working for New Jersey Transit as Amtrak President. Just as California is the biggest Amtrak donor state, with \$60 million in operations and \$50 million in capital typical over the last 3 years, New Jersey has been the biggest per capita recipient state. It has more basic system Amtrak train miles than California (5270 vs. 4700 daily) despite population less than one quarter of California's... SILENCE IS SCARCE ON BOARD THE QUIET CAR, the Capitol Corridor's promising new idea, especially when the engineer believes the horn is for continuous use for the entire extent of Dixon, South Vacaville, Fairfield and Suisun, when stop announcements are verbose, and when the conductor makes PA system announcements preceded by three overamplified bleeps on the klaxon. One other problem is that curious (and loud) kids in school groups come to investigate... THE REFERENCE TO CAFE STANDARDS in the last issue made a number of rail alphabet soup spouters scratch their heads. Mea culpa. "CAFE" refers to Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency, (and low miles/gallon CAFE figures result eventually in some form of U.S. penance being paid)... THE BUS SUBSTITUTE for the cancelled 8:17pm Emeryville departure for Sacramento is indeed running starting with the April 29 schedule. It leaves Emeryville at 8:45pm. Look for it on the top right of one of the bus pages, not on the train page... CALTRANS DIRECTOR JEFF MORALES, by the provocative act of boarding an Amtrak train with a Metrolink ticket, and months of persistence, has gotten Metrolink and Amtrak to break down some of the tariff barriers between their networks. Starting later this summer or fall, a new program "Take the Next Train" will allow interchangeable use of 10-ride tickets, monthlies, and possibly other fares between Ventura and Orange Counties on the Surfliners and Metrolink... ANY POST—9/11 IMPACT ON CALIFORNIA TRAIN ridership was invisible in total numbers, with all three state corridors near flat in Fall 2001. However, San Joaquin linked bus-rail trip data shows that rail traffic grew 35 percent in city pairs with air service while it declined in most other markets. Apparently, the only reason San Joaquin revenues didn't get hammered since 9/11 is the quantity of refugees from the delays and misery of local air travel... CHECK OUT OUR REBUILT WEB SITE AT www.calrailnews.com and while you're there send an e-mail to Congress concerning the need to retain funding for Amtrak, especially long-haul trains serving California. E-mailing Congress is now a mainstream method to be heard. Our site now has a button that links directly to the Capitol Advantage site where you can send a message of your choice to both your senators and member of congress with a single click. Try it at: www.calrailnews.com