

Union Pacific's Punishment of Capitol Commuters Must End

Opinion by Alan C. Miller, Executive Director, TRAC

Capitol commuters sit waiting on double track at a crossover for 15 minutes for a freight coming at them on the same track. Commuters stare at the rear end of a freight for 20 minutes at the Yolo Causeway. Commuters have to arrive on time and wonder if they will make it and what their boss will say this time. Many worry the next late arrival will make it impossible for them to continue as patrons.

What can be done? One possibility is negotiation by the Capitol Corridor Joint Powers Agency (CCJPA) of a new performance standard that doesn't condone poor operation. A skilled engineer can run a train from Davis to Sacramento in 16 minutes, but the scheduled time is 33 minutes. In addition, any train within 10 minutes of scheduled arrival is considered on time. Thus, Union Pacific can delay a train 27 minutes yet escape any fine being levied! This gives UP dispatchers far too much leeway to run a sloppy passenger operation.

A so-called 'SWAT' team is mobilizing to talk over the problem. The team is meeting over a month after the timekeeping melted down yet again (a real SWAT team mobilizes in minutes). The real question is whether talks will have any impact on a company as arrogant and dictatorial as Union Pacific.

As one of two mega-railroads serving the West, UP should care about serving the people. Instead, it shows disdain for the passengers, the taxpayers and the towns through which it passes. A railroad as large as UP is a fundamental part of America's infrastructure. The Union Pacific has a responsibility to the people of California—especially because the public has invested nearly a half billion dollars in its tracks.

Union Pacific is risking total loss of the cooperation that the CCJPA has provided on issues of critical financial concern to its management, because it can't seem to alter its bad habit of putting the passenger last. The CCJPA has patiently pursued years of slight improvements, only to see huge slips in performance in the past six months, some of them seemingly timed as if they were reactions to media reports about possible

additional service.

The State of California, which has for years willingly acted as the conduit to Union Pacific for hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars, could become fed up rather instantly, because some of its key officials now ride. When commuters travel with cell phones, they are able to transmit damning information to technical staff about freights sent out improperly ahead of passenger trains. It can be aggravating for those fielding the calls, but it just may save our service.

Better attention to on-time performance on the Capitol Corridor is a critical need. The route has gone from obscurity to fourth in the nation in corridor ridership in less than five years. It can only keep growing if the on-time problem gets addressed forcefully.

TRAC invites you to help make things hot this summer for Union Pacific: 1) Write CCJPA and Caltrans to demand legal action to make the trains run on time. Send copies to your local newspaper. 2) If you have good details on freight-caused delays as they are happening, give the CCJPA a cell call. It's better than sitting angry on a siding.

**Capitol Corridor Joint Powers Agency
1000 Broadway, Suite 604, Oakland, CA
94607, telephone (510) 464-6995**

**Caltrans Division of Rail, P.O. Box
942874, Sacramento, CA 94274-0001,
telephone (916) 654-7193**

What Others Are Saying:

Imagine being late to work three days out of 10—not just a few minutes late, but an hour, sometimes more. That's the sad reality for commuters who rode Capitol Corridor trains between Sacramento and Oakland last month. On-time performance on the route in April was a dismal 68.8 percent. Actual performance was even worse. Under the rules, a train is on time when it arrives no more than 10 minutes past the scheduled arrival time. Next time you're 10 minutes late to work, try telling that to the boss. - **Sacramento Bee**

Bush Attack on Amtrak (continued)

that dates from the 1920's. Our national railroad frankly will continue to be a basket case until it receives the kind of investment that our government has routinely made in roads, canals, and airports.

Congress must resist the administration's desire to completely reshuffle rail funding, and insist that basic investments in Amtrak's infrastructure be made ahead of privatization. Granted that Amtrak has made some unwise expenditures in the past, but Gunn's choices for spending are relatively modest and hard to fault.

The administration still has yet to spell out key details of its proposal. For it to be taken seriously as an improvement, not just a scheme to kill off passenger trains, the Bush administration has to offer more and better service in the near term. To be believable to Congress, there has to be an increase in funding for rail, not just words saying things will improve, while the details provide no way to retire Amtrak's debt and no funds to build new faster rail lines. As it stands, the privatization proposal just looks to many Californians like another scam such as energy deregulation.

Bush administration attacks on Amtrak have recruited even the *New York Times*, often a key Amtrak critic, to ride to the railroad's defense. Calling America's approach to passenger rail "woefully haphazard and shortsighted," the *Times* observes that all other modes are "routinely financed, without a Congressional debate every year on their continued existence. Only when it comes to trains must Washington look around for spare change to keep the service running."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

To help get Amtrak full funding, let your Senators and Congressman know you support the Amtrak five year plan proposed by David Gunn. Let them know how important Amtrak is to your mobility as a senior, as a parent, or as a commuter. www.capitoladvantage.com allows you to send a message to both your senators and member of congress with a single click. You can also use the TRAC site to get to their e-mail button at www.calrailnews.com

California Rail News

Published 4-6 times annually
by the California Rail Foundation
in cooperation with the
Train Riders Association of California

Richard Tolmach, TRAC President
Alan C. Miller TRAC Executive Director

Signed opinion articles represent the views of their authors, not necessarily those of the above organizations.

926 J Street, Suite 612,
Sacramento, CA 95814
Telephone: 916-557-1667
Fax: 916-448-1789
e-mail: trac@omsoft.com
www.calrailnews.com

The *California Rail News* encourages letters, comments, and reports on local issues. Please submit your material to California Rail News, 926 J Street, Suite 612, Sacramento, CA 95814. Sorry, we do not guarantee return of photos or articles submitted. Deadline for material to be included in the next issue of the *California Rail News* is July 1, 2003.

DICKY'S WORLD

