

# California Rail News

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## Why Delay New Coast Train? 25 LEGISLATORS ASK AMTRAK TO START IN JULY



by **Richard F. Tolmach**

California legislators are asking for just a little bit of progress by Amtrak following the expenditure of nearly a billion dollars by the state on locomotives, cars, and track upgrades for the national system.

A letter circulated by Assembly Member Hannabeth Jackson (D-Santa Barbara) and signed by 24 other Assembly Members and Senators asks Amtrak to begin the second promised coast train "as soon as possible—ideally next month—so we do not lose a significant opportunity to encourage alternative travel in California."

Ridership recently passed the 2 million annual trips mark on the popular blue Pacific Surfliner trains. That, along with record revenues, means Caltrans has more than enough funding to operate the new train. Several stations showed extraordinary growth—in the range of 43% to 71% last year.

A disproportionate amount of the ridership growth happened west of Los Angeles, where U.S. 101, and State Route 118 now have heavy congestion, even on weekends.

Recreational travel produces some of the worst delays on U.S. 101, but these weekend and tourist trips represent an important component of the economies of Santa Barbara, Ventura, and San Luis Obispo Counties.

The continuing growth trend between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara makes it imperative that sufficient trains be added at times Highway 101 is crowded.

State officials worked for months with Amtrak, Metrolink, and Union Pacific to secure the right to operate an additional

train and obtain a desirable train slot from Los Angeles to San Luis Obispo in the early morning (with an early evening return arrival at LA Union Station). Amtrak earlier had assured the state that it had equipment available for a May start of service.

The ability to break through bureaucracy and introduce new service in an election year is key to making intercity rail politically potent. Amtrak did this on the San Diegan Route in 1976 and on the San Joaquin Route in 1980 for California. Amtrak began and then cemented its financially rewarding relationship with the state rail program in each case by getting trains going with less than 60 days advance notice.

2004 is also a Federal election year, but despite a year's advance notice, Amtrak has been slow to act, and in May reportedly told state officials that it couldn't start a new train before November, reportedly due to the need to hire and train four to six people.

Coastal California rail supporters are understandably frustrated by the pace of progress. Nearly all the bond monies from Proposition 116 have been expended, fourteen years after California voters approved it, but the state still doesn't have a single Los Angeles-San Francisco train to show for it.

"Amtrak and Caltrans have been blocked repeatedly in starting their first state train linking northern and southern California"

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**SPEIER'S SUCCESS ON BABY BULLETS**

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