

# BUSH AND HOUSE PLOT AMTRAK CUTBACKS

On September 4, the GOP-controlled U.S. House of Representatives headed off efforts to further cut federal support to Amtrak, but also beat back attempts by several prominent Republican Members of Congress to raise Amtrak funding to approximately the amount Amtrak's President David Gunn says he needs to retain existing trains.

In its version of Transportation-Treasury Appropriations Bill (H.R. 2989), which funds Amtrak, the House ended up designating \$900 million for next year's Amtrak budget, exactly half of Gunn's target, but identical to the amount President Bush proposed.

The Surface Transportation Policy Project, a pro-transit policy analysis group, observes that the House version of the bill underfunds Amtrak to the point that a system shutdown is expected, and changes the rules on urban and regional rail projects to make it harder to begin new rail systems.

At the same time, H.R. 2989 wipes out Transportation Enhancement funds used by cities for historical and environmental proj-

ects, and cutting funding to the Jobs Access and Reverse Commute program substantially below the levels guaranteed by prior TEA-21 legislation.

Rep. Jack Quinn, R-N.Y., told lawmakers the \$900 million budgeted for Amtrak would guarantee only the continuation of a crisis on the rails. He called the amount "just enough money to make sure it fails."

Quinn spoke with the knowledge he had the support of the bipartisan majority of the House which had written directly to House Appropriations Committee leaders to indicate its support for Amtrak's request of \$1.8 billion for the new fiscal year.

Quinn made a proposal to fund Amtrak at a \$1.7 billion level for FY 04 and delay for one year the repayment of the \$1 billion Transportation Department loan dating from the Acela meltdown. He then withdrew the amendment under direct pressure from Appropriations Committee members.

Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., chair of the Appropriations subcommittee that picked the

\$900 million Amtrak figure, launched an extremely hostile retort to Quinn's proposed amendment and claimed that it attempted to legislate substantive policy changes in the guise of a funding measure. This was an outrageous taunt, because Istook and his subcommittee are engaging in the exact type of overstepping of boundaries in their attempt to undermine TEA-21 renewal policy which has traditionally been set by authorizing committees.

Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., was the author of an amendment to completely end Amtrak funding which lost 322-90, showing the relative strength of that camp.

Also on September 4, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved \$1.35 billion in subsidies for Amtrak, more than the House version but considerably less than the \$1.8 billion originally considered. Further funding decisions on Amtrak and transit by each house are expected by mid-September, but increasingly, the range of possibilities for Amtrak is between tight (\$1.35 billion) and shutdown (\$900 million).

## California Rail Leaders Weigh into Amtrak Debate

In a September 3 letter to the California Congressional Delegation, Governor Gray Davis requested that Representatives vote to increase federal funding for Amtrak. If funded at the current level, Amtrak officials have claimed the railroad will need to be shut down. "This is simply unacceptable for California," wrote Gov. Davis. "Over 3.9 million Californians who depended last year on intercity passenger rail will be required to find alternatives. Gov. Davis pointed out that an Amtrak shutdown would "exacerbate traffic congestion and increase air pollution in California."

The Governor's letter comes at a time when rail ridership has been growing in California. "A potential shutdown would also jeopardize a partnership between Amtrak and California that has become a model for other states across the country.

Unlike most states, California not only owns the trains devoted to intercity passenger rail, but also funds the operation of service. Since taking office, Davis has dedicated nearly \$600 million to track, signal and station improvements across the state.

"In short, we have stepped up to the plate and delivered," wrote Gov. Davis. "These investments must be protected. Gov. Davis called for the California Delegation to support any legislative efforts to increase Amtrak funding to \$1.8 billion.

Gene Skoropowski, Managing Director of the Capitol Corridor Joint Powers Board also had some choice words on the subject. He castigated Federal rail officials for their lack

of support, "after some 31 years of starving the national passenger rail system to death, now propose a major plan to help that system by transferring all of the costs to the states, most of which are now broke."

"I view the administration plan as just another way of killing the national passenger rail system," said Skoropowski, "since the Congress has always come through when administration after administration has tried to kill off the trains by proposing little or no funding in their budgets."

"I just do not understand all the political capital expended trying to kill the national train system," said Skoropowski. "It is a 'winner' for travel, for the construction industry, for the railroad industry, and most surely for the people of our nation."

A completely different approach was put forward by Chief Executive Officer David Solow, of Metrolink, who views administration proposals as a good starting point for expansion of his network to replace Amtrak.

Solow considers the definitions in the Rail Passenger Service Act dividing intercity and commuter service to antiquated, and wants to have the ability to claim funds that would be made available under proposed Bush Administration privatization statutes for Metrolink expansion.

Solow lauds local control, complementary services in commuter/intercity corridors, contracting out for services, and management on a corridor level as being the coming trend in rail passenger service. A retreat by partici-

pants in the LOS-SAN corridor board this month will be the venue for discussions for how to advance the regionalization of service replacing state and federal participation.

Ironically, Fall, 2003 may be the worst possible time to consider changing funding arrangements for rail passenger service in California. The daunting \$38 billion state deficit is combining with local shortfalls and federal shortfalls to make a threat to every rail service operated, be it Amtrak, Caltrans, or Metrolink who provides it.

## Ayerdi to Lead Transbay

At the Transbay JPA meeting of August 21, Maria Ayerdi was voted in as Executive Director of the terminal project. TRAC testified at the meeting and enthusiastically endorsed Ms. Ayerdi.

TRAC has long advocated bringing San Francisco's main railroad station downtown for the first time in history. According to San Francisco Tomorrow: "it would be no exaggeration to state that this project would not exist were it not for [Ayerdi's] ceaseless and selflessly public-spirited work."

SFT praised her as "an executive who has demonstrated an ability to work with the business community, with environmentalists, with local and regional government bodies, with transportation authorities and with the general public." The appointment of Ayerdi gives encouragement that the project will continue to progress..

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