

Amtrak User Hopes for Improvements

By Alan C. Miller
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"Facilities for disabled people are too often designed, ordered and manufactured by non-disabled people," says TRAC member Bill McGeehan. McGeehan finds rail the premier mode of travel for those using wheelchairs (Bill recently logged rail mile 300,000). In a recent interview, he expressed hope that the disabled would be included in future equipment and station planning.

McGeehan, 39, has cerebral palsy, which has made it increasingly difficult to walk without the assistance of a wheelchair as he approached his 30's. McGeehan uses the Capitol Corridor for travel from his San Pablo home, especially to Sacramento. He has also made several cross-country journeys on Amtrak's inter-regional trains. He recently logged his 300,000th mile on Amtrak.

An example of bad decisions for the disabled, he says, are the power chair lifts on the California Cars used on the Capitols.

They are too complex, the gates can't be closed properly, and when they fail the disabled person is stuck and the entire train is delayed. Bill says most disabled persons agree that passive ramps, such as those found on Amtrak Superliners, are far superior and easy to use, and—having no moving parts—are far safer and more reliable. He blames power ramp installations on lobbying by lift manufacturers whom he says make a killing by getting agencies such as Caltrans to agree to use their product.

Bill uses a "power chair," a bit longer than the average chair and says these are becoming more common. He finds the lower level of the California Car difficult to maneuver. He suggests updating the table with the new foldable type and removing the triangular cabinet and folding chair, noting that they impede access to the handicapped bathroom.

Unlike many wheelchair users, Bill can walk, although it has become increasingly painful and difficult over the years. If he wishes to purchase food, he is able to make his way slowly upstairs to the lounge. He says most wheelchair users are pretty much "outta luck" if they want to eat on board. He especially dislikes the situation where the lounge is on the lower level with the newer order of cars, which requires him to go up and down stairs an additional time. Unlike Superliner lounges, there are no disabled facilities on the lower level of the new lounge cars, unless the passenger wishes to use the restroom for the entire trip.

He notes that some airlines automatically upgrade handicapped passengers to first class, and suggests the Capitols should offer first class and offer such upgrades to the handicapped. With this situation, the first class attendant could serve food to these passengers and assist with any special needs they may have. He believes this would increase ridership by making rail much more popular with the handicapped community.

Although he resides closest to the Richmond station, he avoids this station—which he calls the "iron triangle"—and Berkeley because there is no one there to assist a disabled person and because of safety concerns. He uses the AC Transit paratransit service to bypass these stations and drop him off at the staffed Emeryville station to access the Capitol Corridor. Even when Richmond was a staffed station he avoided it, because the Amtrak agent was locked within a downstairs office and rarely ventured onto the platform.

Besides the unstaffed stations such as Richmond, McGeehan is disturbed by the lack of progress at staffed stations such as Sacramento. Promised improvements there are moving along at a snail's pace, and he says that the safety hassles of rough pave-



Bill McGeehan finds the spot for his chair just a bit too tight, due to immovable furniture.

ment and poor pedestrian/traffic separation are magnified for the disabled.

He is hopeful that air-conditioning will be installed in the waiting room soon. While waiting for a train in Sacramento recently on a sweltering summer day, Bill decided to take matters into his own hands. Reasoning that cool air settles, he took refuge in the platform-access tunnel to escape the heat.

McGeehan is concerned about plans to build Amtrak platforms several hundred feet further from the depot and abandon historic platforms. He hopes Regional Transit's promised start on light-rail tracks to the depot later this year and service by 2005 will end talk of a station move. Once RT finally completes a functional cross-platform, intermodal connection, McGeehan asks, why would taxpayers want to foot the bill to destroy the

tracks, the platforms and the tunnels, and also pay to rebuild them further out? He wants station designers to understand that added distance may be an inconvenience to able-bodied passengers, but is a major difficulty for the disabled.

McGeehan makes the above comments with the goal of improving the system. Bill is thrilled with the expansion in frequency he has seen on the *San Joaquins* and *Capitols*, and despite his critiques, he finds rail travel offers more room and convenience for the disabled than any other transportation form, and gives disabled people "time to regroup" before and after they travel. He says Amtrak is one government agency that really helps the disabled get around and "the staff of Amtrak works hard to help everyone with their needs the best they can."

US-BUILT DMU TOURS WEST



Colorado Railcar, successful producer of specially engineered dome cars for cruise lines, Alaska Railroad, and other scenic lines, is exploring the market for regional rail by its newest product line, an aerodynamically styled Diesel multiple unit car capable of pulling up to two 85-foot trailer coaches.

The jury is still out, because the heavy-weight car, designed to meet FRA 49 CFR part 238 structural requirements which fail some existing locomotives, looks a bit overbuilt to advocates of diesel light rail.

Because of weight concerns, the car may not work out on some branch lines, but could be a practical answer to regional mainline service, as the cost-per-seat on three car trains is attractive compared to other equipment currently on offer in the United States.

Colorado Railcar still apparently has a supply of salvaged Southern Pacific gallery commuter cars which it is prepared to rebuild into either domes or "gallery low floor ADA Accessible DMUs," with a tare weight of 194,000 lbs. Their single-level power cars are 175,000 lbs unloaded.

Either single-level or gallery power cars are equipped with a pair of Detroit Diesel series 60 motors, each rated at 600 hp and Voith transmissions typical of European DMU practice. A separate generator runs air conditioning on models which have domes.

Claimed fuel consumption is 0.5 gallons per mile, equivalent to the best performance by European units. Colorado Railcar also claims that the DMU beats EPA emissions standards for locomotives.