

ALTAMONT COMMUTER EXPRESS SEEKS NEW ROUTE

by Alan C. Miller and Gary S. Perazzo

For the first several years of its seven years of operation, Altamont Commuter Express (ACE) patrons enjoyed running on a route that Union Pacific (UP) considered largely surplus, running only a couple of daily freights at times not conflicting with ACE's three weekday round trips. Those days may be over for good. With increased freight volume and new operating patterns, freight trains frequently occupy the Altamont route during commute hours. The result is devastating to patrons who's bosses may understand a traffic jam but may be less sympathetic to the excuse, "We sat in the siding waiting for a freight to pass for over an hour."

On time performance, critical in commute operations, has improved into the 80%-plus range this summer, way up from an all time low of only 41% of trains on-time in June of 2005. Performance remains below the 90% level ACE believes is required for a viable commute operation, or the 95% on-time level stipulated in the contract between ACE and UP. Indeed, a significant percentage of passengers earlier this year abandoned the train and suffered in Hwy. 580 traffic instead. In an attempt to "do something for passengers" and gain back lost riders, ACE offered 10% discounts on fares for two months last spring.

Union Pacific is projecting that freight traffic over Altamont Pass will increase substantially as the freight container transfer facilities at the Port of Oakland are improved. Though overall on-time performance has improved since winter, ACE does not see sharing the track with UP freights as sustainable long-term. "We need to be in control of our own destiny, and we are dependent on UP right now," said Greg Baxter, ACE Director of Operations. To seek long-term ability to control on-time performance, the ACE Board of Directors has authorized \$500,000 to study alternate routes to get its trains from the Central Valley into the Bay Area.

One possibility is using the former Southern Pacific line between Tracy and Niles Junction that parallels the UP route. This route was abandoned in the mid-1980s and the track torn out. This was part of the original transcontinental railroad that was built in 1870 as the first rail entrance to the Bay Area. Currently, about nine miles of that route has been re-tracked by the Pacific Locomotive Association for their Niles Canyon Railway tourist operation between a point east of Sunol and Niles Junction. The tourist line appears open to the idea of sharing the tracks with its tourist operations, an arrangement that could be a boon to the museum under the right terms, extending its reach without cost to the museum. Another major hurdle for the SP route

is the fact that Pleasanton has built homes on part of the right-of-way through town.

Another route could be in the Interstate 580 corridor. This route and any totally new route certainly would be the more costly than the former Southern Pacific route. High Speed Rail is also looking at a route through the Altamont corridor. ACE could share this corridor with a parallel track or compatible equipment if this corridor is chosen, but that is only a maybe and at least 10-20 years in the future. Another alternative might be to double track and bi-directionally signal the Union Pacific line to accommodate the increased freight traffic and improve the ACE operation. This could be a winning situation for both parties involved but only if ACE can negotiate a contractual guarantee of on time performance from the Union Pacific once the double track is complete. Public investment in private railway infrastructure for passenger rail service is no guarantee of on-time performance. So far, ACE (taxpayers) has paid UP \$41 million for the right to run on UP rails. That apparently isn't enough to coax UP into running the trains on time in return.

Baxter doesn't blame UP. "We have a real good, professional relationship with Union Pacific. However, they are sometimes victims of their own success, and we (ACE) are a victim of their network issues."

ACE's objective is to institute a fourth round trip in the near future, but will not do so until the on time performance issue is resolved. ACE is also looking into purchasing an exclusive right-of-way between Tracy and Stockton. Even if new routes are found over Altamont and east, ACE will still have to deal with the Union Pacific between Niles Junction and San Jose. ACE is also looking into expansion possibilities over the Dumbarton Bridge in conjunction with Caltrain, to Modesto and Turlock, and north to Sacramento. No matter what the outcome of the corridor study, the ACE operation needs to improve and expand as congestion on the Interstate 580 highway corridor increases between the Bay Area and the San Joaquin Valley.

L.A. TIMES CLAIMS GAS IS CHEAPER THAN METROLINK

A front page *Los Angeles Times* article August 18 about how Californians are trying to save money on gas gave short shrift to trains as an alternative.

"There's always money to be saved by taking the train for longer commutes, right?" the *Times* suggested. "Not necessarily. A 70-mile round trip commute from Santa Clarita to downtown Los Angeles would cost \$7 to \$8 in fuel. The same trip costs \$12 on Metrolink," claimed the article.

Actually, most Metrolink commuters from Santa Clarita buy the monthly pass, which works out to \$8.13 per weekday.

The *Times*' gas cost figures appear to be equally slanted. The \$7 fuel figure assumes 27 miles per gallon, quite a bit better than the reported American fleet average of 21. If real gas mileage is used, the average cost of fuel is between \$9 and \$10.

Only drivers of something rather efficient seem to have a chance of beating current Metrolink fares, and that's only if oil, maintenance, insurance and parking expenses are ignored. These obligatory items put costs back far above the \$10 level. SUV drivers with typical performance of 14 miles per gallon have direct costs of \$14 to \$16 per trip and total costs of over \$20. That's a lot more than the \$8.13 on Metrolink.

Coast Observations

SENATORS TRENT LOTT (R-MS), Ted Stevens (R-AK) and Frank Lautenberg (D NJ) introduced new Amtrak legislation to authorize full funding of Amtrak. The Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act (PRIIA) would provide 6 years of funding totalling \$11.4 billion... PRIIA WOULD REDUCE Amtrak's operating subsidy by 40% by cost-cutting, restructuring of debt and reform, while increasing capital funding... OTHER POSITIVE features of PRIIA include a competitive bid program in which freight railroads could bid for long distance trains, a capital program for establishing new state-funded routes, and a process involving the Surface Transportation Board in assuring on-time operation. If the STB determines freight railroads are at fault, the board may take appropriate action to enforce priority access for Amtrak... NEW STATE BUSES starting at the Fall schedule change include more Bay Area feeders to the Surfliners, more Inland Empire San Joaquin feeders, and new service from Palo Alto/Sunnyvale and Monterey connecting to the San Joaquins. Financial performance is to be watched closely to assure profitable operation... CHEF MARIO GOT NOTICE in Congressional hearings, as a Texas congressman repeated the false report by a state rail official in a railfan publication saying Mario's items were profitable. NARP had to set the record straight, noting that labor costs were not included in the calculations of profitability. The actual case is that they have a lower rate of sales than other items... SACRAMENTO LIGHT RAIL continues to expand and change, with a switch of route destinations this month making Watt-I-80 pair with Meadowview and the East Line terminate downtown. Folsom service will be in full test operation by mid-August and work on the Amtrak extension will be in full swing by September. Folsom will begin service October 15 but the opening of the Amtrak extension has been delayed to Fall, 2006... GARY PATTON OF SANTA CRUZ, a longtime environmental activist, is the new executive director of the Planning and Conservation League, of which TRAC is a member. PCL partnered with TRAC on the 1990 rail initiative. Patton is a supporter of passenger rail... SUISUN CONNECTIONS shown in current San Joaquin timetables via Sacramento aren't necessarily all sensible ones. For example, Martinez is the superior transfer point from Train 713 (you can save 41 minutes and a needless bus ride). This item courtesy a helpful San Joaquin ticket agent... AMTRAK FUNDING IS NEARLY secured, but we still need to press for adoption of the bipartisan PRIIA legislation which would improve service and enforce passenger train priority on freight railroads. Please write or send an e-mail to your Senators and Member of Congress NOW to assure you can ride next year to: Hon. _____ House of Representatives, Washington DC 20515 or Sen. _____, Senate Office Building, Washington DC 20510. At www.trainriders.org you can click the flashing blue button that allows you to enter your zip code and get the name of your member of congress, then click to send an e-mail...

California Rail News

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

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