

# Sunset Limited in Danger

by Lyndon Henry

During this past summer, many Amtrak supporters—and particularly supporters of the Sunset Limited—began to become alarmed at the spate of outrageous (i.e., half-DAY etc.) delays that were being inflicted upon this train. These delays, either by design or accident, have the effect of driving ridership away and driving up costs. While the Sunset Limited's performance is erratic, operation of the train seems to be approaching the unworkable. Bus substitution is so commonplace at times it almost affects every run.

The Sunset Limited deserves particular concern in part because its Amtrak's only transcontinental train. Also, because of this strategic function, it makes critical direct connections with, and acts as a passenger feeder to, another dozen Amtrak trains. It is also "host" to the California-connected rolling stock of the Texas Eagle.

By almost every criterion, the Sunset Limited route appears to take a sort of dark prize for experiencing the most traffic-congested conditions, certainly the worst delays, within the entire Amtrak system. Again and again, the Sunset has the dubious distinction of having the worst on-time performance of any route, and all too often the rate is 0%.

California supporters of the Sunset should be particularly alarmed because these conditions and especially the *de facto* breakdowns experienced over the summer signal that abandonment of the Sunset may be looming. Certainly, the Sunset is a particular target of Amtrak opponents, anti-Amtrak political gorillas, the Amtrak-bashing media, and the would-be Amtrak executioners in Washington and their allies (including the Union Pacific Railroad). Let us not forget that Wendell Cox was a principal transportation advisor to the Bush transition team, and appears to remain closely influential to this powerful segment of the power elite in Washington.

The repeated and bizarre infrastructure failures along the Sunset route, coupled with increasing freight traffic, highlight a crisis not just for Amtrak but for east-west transcontinental railway service in general. The private railroads apparently are not fazed - as long as they can deliver some kind of profit to their base, and as long as it can be absorbed by their insurance coverage, they seem to be content to accept isolated disasters, derailments, poisonous spills, environmental havoc, and delays characteristic of the most absurd Third World railway operations such as those in Central Africa or parts of Latin America. Of course, someone will point out to me that UPRR or CSX is patching track here or there, but it is difficult to be convinced that this is more than bandaiding to enable some modicum of continued traffic movement to keep a rudimentary profit stream flowing.

Bottom line on this: As many involved with Amtrak and with the railroad industry recognize, America's railroad infrastructure is in utterly desperate condition. At present, the status quo might work, albeit erratically, for freight service, but a crisis—particularly a capacity crisis—is mounting. And clearly, for Amtrak's Sunset Limited, it's a potentially catastrophic situation.

Approximately 30 years ago, various parties along the route of what is now the Texas Eagle mobilized to improve service and bring about direly needed route improvements. At the encouragement of Dan Monaghan in Dallas, the Texas Association for Public Transportation undertook to produce a feasibility study and series of recommendations, including the elimination of what was then an egregious dogleg in the Eagle route, for which straightening was recommended to

permit reasonably direct service to Ft. Worth and Dallas. Much of that analysis was adopted, laying the basis for even more progress, and the rest is history.

Perhaps a similar mobilization of "interested parties" along the Sunset route may be helpful in rescuing this key intercontinental train from imminent extinction. This would need to be linked with a program addressing the gravely deteriorating conditions of the affected railroads—whether the private companies recognize the need for this or not.

One of most immediately effective actions to safeguard continuation of the Sunset Limited might be the development of a coordinated support coalition, directly



mainly toward demonstrating public support. [ED. NOTE: TRAC committed at its Sept. board meeting to be part of this coalition.]

Amtrak advocates could help by making contacts and cultivating relationships with key interest groups. These types of individuals make up much of the membership of other effective Amtrak interest groups, such as the TEMPO group which has successfully helped support and upgrade the Texas Eagle.

Not all of these individuals will be supportive, but undoubtedly some of them will emerge as allies in helping to demonstrate and direct support for this train. Email could be used for a mailing list with news updates on the Sunset Limited about once a week. Meanwhile, as perhaps other advocates in other places do the same, and a kind of "network" will gel. As this happens, resolutions and other formal statements, studies, etc. could be used to coalesce and rally support and keep everyone "on the same page".

Certainly, in light of the danger of abandonment hovering over the Sunset, ANY evidence of local support, at this juncture, would be better than nothing. One should keep in mind that squeaking wheels get the grease. Evidence of support for trains like the Texas Eagle has counted for a lot. Now, perhaps the time is right for Sunset supporters to emulate such examples.

**Mr. Henry, formerly of Austin, Texas's Capital Transit board, has won acclaim for his work championing a diesel light rail project serving the Austin area. It was approved in a vote last month, and construction plans are pending.**

## EXPO LRT TO THE OCEAN

by Roger Christensen

The Los Angeles to Santa Monica Expo Light Rail Line has new momentum. The 9.6 mile Phase One of the project via Exposition Boulevard to Culver City is totally funded. Now, the City of Santa Monica has advanced plans for Phase Two by initiating purchase of a plum site for the western rail terminus.

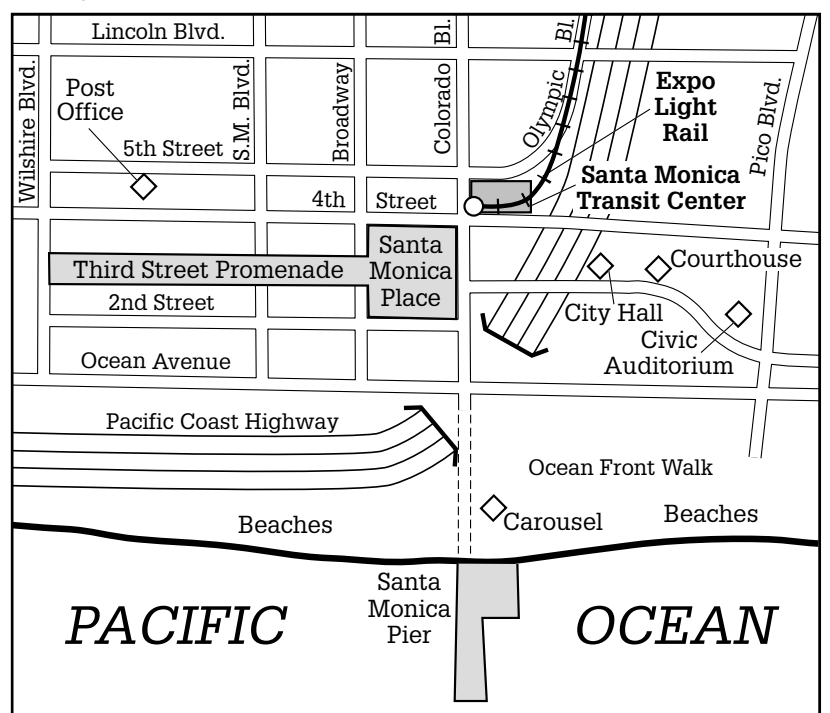
Recently, disheartened by evaporating state and federal funding options, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) agreed in a single action to authorize local bonds for carpool lane projects and to also fill the \$240 million funding gap of the \$489 million Phase One of the Exposition Line. This jumpstarts the light rail project five years sooner to 2009 or 2010. It could open the same year of the six-mile-now-under-construction East L.A. line.

To proceed, the MTA Board must still act upon the Final EIR. Two alignments from downtown to USC are being proposed. A Hill St. route has an at-grade Figueroa St. crossing near USC and the Coliseum and a Flower St. route dips under the same intersection offering a grade separated option.

The MTA Planning and Programming Committee also approved the City of Santa Monica drawing down \$30 million from its Transportation Development Act (TDA) Capital Rail Reserve to purchase right-of-way parcels for a terminus station. The city has chosen the Sears Auto Center at 4th and Colorado as its station site. This places the terminus in a choice location

with walking access to the beach, the Santa Monica Pier, the Civic Center, and the wildly popular retail, restaurant, and entertainment district known as the 3rd St. Promenade. The TDA, authored by TRAC Boardmember Sen. Jim Mills, allows a "claimant" such as the City of Santa Monica to place funds in reserve for future specified capital transit projects.

Meanwhile, MTA is restructuring its network into a hub-and-spoke system. The Metro Connections program plans conversion of key rail stations into major transit hubs. Proposals include relocating the West Los Angeles Transit Center (an unattractive bus hub hidden under Interstate 10) to a better location at the future La Cienega Expo Light Rail stop, as well as making the USC and Santa Monica stations future transit hubs.



**The new station site would provide easy walking access to Santa Monica's prime tourist destinations.**