

EFFORT FOR FREIGHT WON'T HELP AMTRAK

TRAC recently sent the following letter to Phillip Denny of Growth Options for the 21st Century, a freight rail lobby seeking support of NARP and other rail passenger groups for freight rail funds:

Dear Mr. Denny:

I had the opportunity to meet with one of your representatives and was initially impressed by your goals. More recently, we had one of your representatives speak to our full board in September. We have specific concerns about public funding of freight railways only for freight purposes.

At the outset of California's investment in rail lines that began in 1993, we believed that both freight and passenger rail would share equally in the benefits of improvements. A decade has taught us we were naive to believe that. Although California has spent nearly a billion dollars on rail infrastructure, the track improvements and capacity built for passenger rail have been usurped by the freight rail companies; passenger train performance has suffered.

California taxpayers are now unconvinced about any additional funds to improve freight rail corridors because passenger rail performance remains poor after a decade of spending. Also, freight rail company attitudes range from uncaring to hostile to improved passenger rail.

Let me give you some specifics. After years of extremely expensive improvements on the San Joaquin line for both UP and BNSF for passenger service, on-time performance of the San Joaquins in FY 2004 declined to below 50 percent, a historic low.

Two things are at work here. The AT&SF merger with BN added a massive amount of north-south freight to the San Joaquin corridor, jamming sidings and making it impossible to keep Amtrak schedules. At the same time, Union Pacific crew problems have led to abandoned freight trains on their main lines. A recent incident had a San Joaquin train trapped between two UP freights, both of which were "dead on the law."

It is all too well known that freight railroads are their own worst enemies in terms of survival of the industry as a whole. Despite the well-known long-term capital funding deficit between what railroads need to renew their facilities and what they can generate in the next 20 years (over a \$50 billion gap), most of these railroads have no coherent strategy to fund the industry.

Your organization offers a general goal, but no solution to destructive industry culture. BNSF, one of the few railroads motivated to improve its facilities, has for years invested in bi-directional double tracking of its Los Angeles-Chicago main line. Union Pacific, on the other hand, has diverted assets away from its railroad. Despite the desperate need for bi-directional double tracking of the Sunset Route from Los Angeles to at least as far east as Sierra Blanca, Texas—for both freight and passenger rail—Union Pacific cannot take this on anytime soon without massive government subsidy. If the US government were to decide this was an important investment in US transportation, BNSF would no doubt balk at this subsidy in light of the fact that they built their line with their own money. How will issues such as this be addressed should your organization succeed in obtaining government subsidies for the railroads?

Why should we support your organization? We asked your representatives for statements in your literature of a joint-improvement partnership strategy with passenger rail but were told this was not there. Further

we wanted assurances that the GO21 strategy would be more than just words, but a true partnership. Barring even the words, the partnership is impossible. Looking over your literature, we find your main study done by Wendell Cox. You might as well tell the NAACP your minority relations study was done by David Duke. Wendell Cox is well known in the rail passenger advocacy community as being biased and hostile toward passenger rail.

Furthermore, your literature speaks of the advantages in freight rail investment to those experiencing highway congestion by getting trucks off the highway. Were you truly interested in improving rail infrastructure overall, your web site would mention how improvements to rail infrastructure would offer more capacity for passenger rail as well, allowing commuters to avoid the highways altogether.

After speaking to your representative, our board was convinced that GO21 was committed to support of freight rail expansion only. We heard nothing that convinced us that your desire for our support offered anything more than lip service, or that these improvements would result in furthering our goals as well as yours. The board voted unanimously not to support GO21.

As a result of this, we have contacted our national affiliate and urged them not to support your organization. Furthermore, we asked that all the other state rail passenger associations be contacted with the recommendation to do the same. We have also contacted local rail passenger support groups in California urging them not to support GO21.

I believe that it is possible that we could work in partnership someday. Formulas must be created that make the freight railroads responsible to invest in additional capacity when their traffic levels rise above a certain level after improvements are made that were intended to benefit passenger rail. Ideally, improvements to the rail infrastructure of the United States should benefit both passenger and freight rail. We do not see GO21's current approach as facilitating such a joint effort. We hope this will change and we can work together toward a shared goal at some time in the future.

Sincerely,

Alan C. Miller, TRAC Executive Director

California Rail News

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

Richard Tolmach, TRAC President
Alan C. Miller TRAC Executive Director

Signed opinion articles represent the views of their authors, not necessarily those of the above organizations.

926 J Street, Suite 1107,
Sacramento, CA 95814
Telephone: 916-557-1667
e-mail: trac@omsoft.com
www.calrailnews.com

The California Rail News encourages letters, comments, and reports on local issues. Please submit your material to California Rail News, 926 J Street, Suite 1107, Sacramento, CA 95814. Sorry, we do not guarantee return of photos or articles submitted. Deadline for material to be included in the next issue of the California Rail News is January 1, 2005.

Coast Observations

CONNEX, OPERATOR of Boston's MBTA Commute Services, Stockholm Metro and diverse German regional rail systems, won a SCRRA procurement on November 11 and will take over the Metrolink operating contract from Amtrak effective July 1, 2005. One of its partners in the bid is BNSF, giving it a leg up on operational savvy and labor relations. Connex will use BNSF's existing program to train and certify engineers. The contract is worth up to \$210 million over a decade... TRAINS WIN VOTES is the message from the November election. Ballot measures that include funding for trains were at the top of the polls in California. Sacramento County's measure got a 75 percent positive, with its promises of light rail extensions to Elk Grove and (already funded, actually) Folsom. San Mateo County also scored 75 percent support with promised CalTrain and bus improvements and BART's earthquake retrofit bonds passed easily. Marin got by with buses and a 70 percent of votes and Sonoma County won by a squeaker with rail study money in a mostly highway project list with 66.8%. Santa Cruz and Solano Counties lost without significant rail funds. So did Ventura County's, though it had contained some funds for Metrolink and a relatively small amount of transit funding... MAYOR JERRY BROWN'S OAKLAND REVIVAL could get a bigger boost if the condo and loft densification of port and downtown districts was linked by new streetcars. The same team that put together Portland's \$60 million streetcar network recently put out a similar Oakland plan, for an unlikely client, BART. Get a copy at WARREN WEBER, CALTRANS RAIL CHIEF since 1997, is retiring effective December 31, just as a new champion of rail, Caltrans Director Will Kempton gets settled. Unfortunately, there is no qualified successor inside the rail program, due to years of inaction on staff development... 2005 SENATE APPROPRIATIONS MARKUP has \$2.5 million to underwrite cost of passenger rail privatization experiments, as carrot for a state to consider this option... REP. ERNEST ISTOOK (R- Oklahoma) retaliated against 21 Republican colleagues who signed a letter favoring \$1.8 billion for Amtrak by killing highway projects in their districts. Istook radically reduced or cut entirely the earmarks for their districts. The action raised heat with Republicans in the Northeast, because Istook's action targeted vulnerable moderate Republicans who won tough races this fall... HOUSE REJECTION OF THE AMTRAK BUDGET makes the situation dire for future funding. 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.calrailnews.com you can click a 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...