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Field Hearing

Submitted Testimony of  
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Thank you for the opportunity to address the Commission today. My name is Eugene K. Skoropowski and I am the Managing Director of the Capitol Corridor Joint Powers Authority (CCJPA) based in Oakland, California. I have been in this position for nearly eight years, and I have nearly forty years experience in railroad construction, operations, and maintenance. Virtually all of my railroad experience is in the provision of passenger rail service.

The CCJPA is a special purposes district covering 8 counties in Northern California. The member agencies are six transit districts stretching over a 170 mile long major rail corridor owned by Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR), and interconnecting three major metropolitan areas: San Jose, Oakland/San Francisco, and Sacramento. The purpose of the CCJPA is the management, improvement and expansion of intercity passenger rail service along this route. Today, I will address all three California intercity rail services.

The Capitol Corridor is one of three state-supported intercity passenger rail corridors. The three are the Pacific Surfliner route in Southern and Central California, connecting San Diego-Los Angeles-Santa Barbara- San Luis Obispo; the Capitol Corridor just mentioned; and the San Joaquin route, connecting our Central Valley from Bakersfield to Fresno-Modesto-Stockton to Sacramento and Oakland. This intra-state intercity passenger network is operated by Amtrak and includes dedicated connecting buses that extend service coverage to virtually all parts of California, urban, suburban and rural. This integrated network connects to Amtrak's long-distance trains, and has provided our people, and people who visit here with a real travel choice in moving around our state.

This statewide passenger rail system did not 'just happen'. The voters of California in 1990 approved propositions that established the intercity passenger rail program, and authorized billions of dollars to build it. To date, the State has invested more than \$1.7 billion of its own capital funds to build this system, and it has take 15 years to build it. California has 'delivered' what the voters mandated. Last November (2006), California voters approved an additional \$400 million to continue to expand this intercity passenger rail program.

The results are quite 'eye-opening'. In 1990, California had only a handful of Amtrak trains, almost all longer distance national network trains tying our state to the rest of the country. Today, three of Amtrak's top five busiest routes are in California. After the busy Northeast Corridor, the Pacific Surfliner is the nation's second busiest Amtrak route, the Capitol Corridor is the third busiest, and the San Joaquin route is fifth busiest, and soon could overtake New York's Empire Corridor as the fourth busiest.

Although it is not recognized in Washington, or in most other parts of the country, California now generates 20% of all the riders on the Amtrak system. This has happened not because Washington or Amtrak provided a funding source to help us to build what we have, but because Californians decided for themselves at the ballot box that intercity passenger rail was a worthwhile investment, and that intercity passenger rail must become an integrated part of our state's transportation system. I know from contacts with our sister states all across the country, that sentiments are the same in almost every state.

California's intercity passenger rail network has continued to grow, year after year, because of the availability of capital funding. California owns its own fleet of passenger cars and locomotives. We operate the cleanest diesels available. We have a constructive working relationship with the private, host railroads over which our services operate, primarily Union Pacific Railroad and BNSF Railway. We have made significant investments for the provision of our passenger services, and the freight railroads and California's ports have also benefited from these public capital investments.

To sustain this intercity rail program, the state provides \$75 million per year in operating support for these three Amtrak-operated services. This operating support has not increased in the last 6 years, yet passenger use of all three services has skyrocket. In the case of the Capitol Corridor, the state provided funding support in 2001 to increase our frequency from 14 to 18 daily trains. We currently operate 32 daily trains on our trunk between Sacramento and Oakland, the same frequency as the much-touted Northeast Corridor between Boston and New York, with 14 trains extending to/from San Jose. The increase from 18 to 32 trains has been self-financed from passenger revenue growth. This was only able to be done, however, because of the initial; capital investments made by the state.

Our state has established a goal of achieving 50% farebox recovery from passengers of the annual operating costs of our intercity service, and all three services are now accomplishing that goal, and the share borne by the riders is increasing annually as ridership and revenue continue to grow. There were 463,000 riders on the Capitol Corridor in 1998. Today there are more than 1,302,000. We have also implemented many unique-to-California travel 'assists' to riders to provide flexible travel options, by partnering with our state's regional transit operators. In Southern California, the Metrolink-Amtrak Rail-to-Rail flexible ticketing program allows riders to use multiple services on a single ticket. In Northern California, the Transit Transfer program allows passengers on our Amtrak-operated trains to connect 'free' to local transit operations.

Clearly, California has 'delivered' what the voters mandated back in 1990, and what the voters reaffirmed last November. However, even California cannot continue to make 100% of the capital investments in passenger rail ourselves. We need a federal partner for these capital investments, the same way that we have a federal funding 'partner' for our highways, public transit, waterways & ports, airports and air traffic control systems, etc. The only component of our nation's transportation system that has no federal matching program for capital investment is intercity passenger rail service. An excellent report on this issue was prepared and published by AASHTO in 2002, but has received far too little recognition, and no action.

If there is any message I want to deliver to you today, it is to please work to establish a federal capital matching program for states to develop, expand, and improve intercity passenger rail. It is our belief that such a federal matching program, on a par with highways (an 80% federal share and 20% state/local share) will generate nationwide development of this form of travel choice for our country. California and our sister states are just waiting for Washington to act on this, as the people are supportive, from coast-to-coast. Just look at the systems of transport already developed largely because of federal matching programs for them.

I do ask, that in setting up a federal matching program, please to not penalize California and our sister states that have 'gone it alone' and invested 100% state dollars in successful intercity passenger rail systems. We did it because our voters said they wanted it, even though there was no federal matching program. Please allow us credit as 'state match', for the federal capital share we would need to match once a federal funding program is in place.

And please, do not let the 'nay-sayers' tell you that Americans will not ride trains. If here in California, the automobile capital of the planet, we can entice drivers out of their cars and onto trains, think of what can happen in Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio, Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia and all across America, and possibly even in Texas.

The President has called for reducing our dependence on oil. The scientists say we are polluting the air, mostly with auto exhaust, and this is accelerating climate change on our planet. Intercity passenger rail can provide a travel option that does not exist for many Americans, and it is a travel option that is environmentally responsible, improves mobility and helps reduce our oil consumption.

If I can digress for a moment, I'd like to give you real-world examples from two Capitol Corridor riders that underscore the importance of our intercity passenger rail services. Robert Conheim, from Auburn, California, stated that before he started taking the Capitol Corridor train regularly in 2001 to Sacramento, he drove. He racked up 30,000 miles per year on his car just making this regular trip. Since 2001, riding the train, he chalks up barely 3,000 miles per year on his car IN TOTAL. If we are to heed the President's call for reducing our oil dependency, passenger trains are one sure-fire way to do it.

Anne Lawrence, a professor at San Jose State University showed up unannounced one day at my office bearing a large gift. She said, "you don't know me, but what you have done has saved my job and my sanity. You added an additional morning train to San Jose that allows me to give up driving on Interstate 880." (I-880 is the main artery from Oakland to San Jose, and is known for its trucks and hopeless congestion during weekday peak travel periods). She presented our office with an assortment of coffee for our staff as a 'thank you' for simply doing what we have been charged to do. This illustrates how important passenger rail is and can be to the quality of life of our people.

Washington folks need to understand how much intercity passenger rail service means to the people of this country, and how supportive they are of its expansion and improvement. I hope I have conveyed some of that understanding to you today, based on our actual experience here in California. Thank you. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.