



Poll Shows Support for Amtrak

“Overwhelming” Support Among Young

“A large majority of Americans favor continuing federal subsidies to Amtrak,” according to an August 5 *Washington Post* story. The story discussed a poll performed by the paper July 26-30, which was after Congress approved \$205 million in supplemental funding for Amtrak operations through fiscal 2002, and after the Senate Appropriations Committee approved \$1.2 billion for Amtrak in 2003.

There were 1,012 randomly selected, adult respondents to the poll, which had a margin of error of three percentage points. Those called were first told that “...Amtrak lost over a billion dollars last year and relies on loans and subsidies from the federal government to keep running.” They were asked to pick from three options on what to do about Amtrak—51% said to keep federal funding at current levels, 20% said to increase funding (“even if it means Amtrak might lose more money”), and 17% said to end all aid (“even if it means that passenger train service in some parts of the country will be shut down”).

A second question went to the 51% favoring current funding levels—“If you had to choose, are you more inclined to end all federal aid to Amtrak or to increase federal aid to Amtrak?” Of the 51%, 58% said they leaned toward an increase, and 29% leaned toward ending funding. The *Post* went on to say that combining the results of the two questions means 49% lean toward or are in favor of more Amtrak funding, 31% lean toward or favor cutting Amtrak, 7% favor current funding.

Those who identified themselves as Democrats had stronger feelings than those who identified as Republicans, but within the Republican group, more were in favor of higher funding. All age groups, education levels, and income ranges supported funding, with the 18-34 age range doing so “overwhelmingly.”

The article had a reaction from the Bush Administration, saying that the poll should

have asked people’s opinions things like operational efficiencies and state partnerships. NARP supports operational efficiencies and state partnerships, too, but there is deep concern that what the Administration means by those terms would lead to service and route cuts. After all, states are having deep budget problems too, and the idea of states funding the operations of multi-state long-distance services—and having them survive, much less grow—is unrealistic.

The poll should send a message to the Administration about focusing on how to preserve and expand service, rather than just minimizing federal funding. ■

Acela Express Woes Challenge Amtrak

Northeast Corridor service was disrupted after an August 12 equipment inspection revealed a potentially dangerous flaw in a component of an Acela Express train set. Further inspections found the same flaw in 14 of the 18 existing train sets; and, later on, also in some of the new HHP-8 electric locomotives.

The flaw took the form of cracking on a bracket that holds a yaw damper (a type



—Scott Leonard

An Acela Express train at Washington in 2000.

of shock absorber for lateral movement of wheel sets, at high speeds) in place, against the frames of Acela Express power cars and HHP-8 locomotives. Cracking in this location was identified as a possible problem during testing of the equipment (in 1999-2000), but safety officials

ANOTHER STRONG POLL

At the height of the recent Amtrak cash crisis, a question on a CNN/USA Today/Gallup national opinion poll (June 21-23) got a 70% response to the question, “The federal government should continue to provide funding for the cost of running Amtrak, in order to ensure that the U.S. has a national train service.”

A nearly identical question five years ago (Oct. ‘97 News) drew 69% favorable responses.

at the time felt that with proper inspection, future cracking could be caught before the bracket itself failed.

Thus, upon the August 12 discovery, Amtrak acted quickly to prevent cracked parts from falling away during high-speed operation (and potentially causing further damage). Amtrak restricted Acela Express speeds the rest of that day, and cancelled all Acela Express service August 13 so it could inspect all 18 train sets. Two sets ran August 14. Amtrak hoped to run five sets August 15, but a crack was found in one of them, so all Acela Express service was cancelled again. On August 15, the first HHP-8 crack was found.

Disruption to Northeast Corridor passengers ensued, as Amtrak struggled to field conventional equipment to accommodate passengers, and struggled to provide up-to-date information to passengers when events were changing so rapidly. Amtrak was providing refunds to Acela Express passengers for the difference between their ticket and the accommodation they ended up using.

By August 16, Amtrak was running 115 of the Corridor’s 140 departures, using Amfleet cars, older AEM-7 electric locomotives, and locomotives borrowed from

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House Version of Rail Act Introduced

Rep. Julia Carson (D.-Ind.) on July 25, introduced H.R.5216, the National Defense Rail Act, with 22 other sponsors. This bill serves as a House counterpart to S.1991 of the same name, which was approved by the Senate Commerce Committee on April 18. H.R.5216 was referred to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.



Rep. Julia Carson

H.R.5216 is very similar to S.1991, and provides the House with an Amtrak authorization bill alternative that is expansion-minded.

Another bill, H.R.4545, the Amtrak Reauthorization Act of 2002 was approved on May 8 by the Railroads Subcommittee of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. It is a one-year bill authorizing the \$1.2 billion Amtrak says it needs to survive fiscal 2003, plus \$775 million for security measures.

NARP long has said that the reason there isn't a bigger passenger-rail network, one that most Americans really do want, is that we haven't paid for one. H.R.5216 would authorize the funds, through about 2007, needed to do that. However, there is no permanent source of funding for passenger rail in this bill (or S.1991), and the suggested funding levels still would have to be appropriated.

Features include:

- \$580 million a year for long-distance



—Office of Representative Carson

During a recent tour of Amtrak's Beech Grove, Ind., maintenance facility are, from left, facility general manager Lew Wood, Rep. Julia Carson, Beech Grove Mayor Warner Wiley. Carson introduced H.R.5216 on July 25.

trains, including \$360 million in operating grants, \$120 million for rolling stock.

- \$270 million for short-distance and state-supported routes, including \$190 million for infrastructure, \$50 million for rolling stock.

- An average of \$1.3 billion a year for the Northeast Corridor (NEC), including \$720 million for infrastructure and \$400

CARPER ADVANCES SECURITY FUNDS

During consideration by the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee of the National Homeland Security and Combating Terrorism Act (S.2452), Sen. Thomas R. Carper (D.-Del.) successfully got approval of an amendment authorizing security funds for Amtrak.

These include \$778 million for life-safety improvements to Northeast Corridor tunnels, \$375 million for security and safety enhancements to Amtrak service, \$55 million for repair of Amtrak rolling stock.

S.2452 awaits Senate floor consideration. A House counterpart, H.R.5005, was passed July 26.

million for accommodating growth.

- \$340 million a year for other Amtrak operating items, such as debt payments (\$267 million).

- Funds for mandatory excess retirement payments.

- \$1.26 billion in 2003 only for various Amtrak security needs.

- \$1.5 billion for non-NEC high-speed corridor implementation. Expands the list in a manner similar to S.1991 (Mar. News).

- Repeals the operating self-sufficiency mandate.

- Defines a "national rail passenger transportation system" that includes long-distance trains.

- Allows Amtrak to ask the Surface Transportation Board to investigate recurring delays (when on-time performance for a train falls below 80% over three months).

- Calls for an independent financial review of Amtrak's accounting and reporting systems.

Enactment of an authorization this year is unlikely. The focus is on getting the \$1.2 billion approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee (July News).

The report accompanying the Senate appropriations bill, S.2808, pointed out that both Amtrak and the DOT Inspector General, Ken Mead, have said that the \$521 million proposed by the Administration would mean an Amtrak shutdown. ■

2003 TRANSPORTATION FUNDING

Compared with Previous Years
Appropriations (\$ millions)

	1999 Enacted	2000 Enacted	2001 Enacted	2002 Enacted	2003 Bush Request	2003 Senate (pend.)
Administration						
Federal Highway	27,077	28,803	31,675	33,081	24,062 (1)	32,893
Federal Aviation	9,807	9,997	12,074	18,512 (2)	13,582	13,586
Federal Transit	5,389	5,803	6,254	6,871	7,226	7,326
Federal Railroad	778	735	744	1,143	652	1,423
*Amtrak	609	571	520	827	522	1,200

*also in Federal Railroad Administration total.

Intercity Passenger Rail Categories

Amtrak Operations	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)	390
Amtrak Capital	609	571	520	522	522	281
Northeast Corridor	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)	369
Excess Retirement	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)	160
SUBTOTAL	609	571	520	522	522	1,200
Penn Sta./Farley	0	0	20	20	20	20
High Speed Rail	21	27	25	32	23	30
Extraordinary Funds	1,092 (4)	0	0	305 (4)	0	0
PASS. RAIL TOTAL	1,722	598	565	879	565	1,423

NOTES:

1) In 2003, highway reduction stems from reduced gas-tax receipts in time of recession.

2) In 2002, includes \$5 billion provided for airline bailouts in wake of September 11 attacks.

3) Lumped into "Amtrak Capital."

4) In 1999, funds from Taxpayer Relief Act, non-appropriated capital funds provided to Amtrak. In 2002, \$100 million from defense appropriations for Amtrak security items and \$205 million from emergency supplemental for Amtrak operations.

Regarding Union Pacific, BNSF, On-Time Performance, Money

This has not been a good year for delays on Amtrak's long-distance network, especially on Union Pacific (UP). To be sure, some delays are due to Amtrak factors, but even some of those—like the cascading effect of a late inbound train on readiness of crews and equipment for the next departure—ultimately fall to UP.

Part of this is temporary. UP is improving track quality on ex-Southern Pacific lines it now owns, many with heavy freight volumes and most with single track. But

MISSOURI "PROP B" REJECTED

Missouri voters on August 6 rejected Proposition B, which would have raised gas taxes 4 cents a gallon and imposed a half-cent sales tax. It was a possible source for full funding of St. Louis-Kansas City trains (July News), but the new taxes would have gone mainly to roads—and therein lies a problem.

Citizens for Modern Transit estimated \$448 million a year in new revenues, with 86% (\$384 million) for roads, and the balance divided among other modes, including airports, riverports, transit and Amtrak. This was the single biggest tax increase ever proposed in the state, and the first non-user funding (sales tax) for roads.

Of the failure to attract urban votes, "Tom Shrout, executive director of Citizens for Modern Transit, said there wasn't enough money...for a major MetroLink expansion [the St. Louis light rail system]. 'A lot of people I talked to said that's what they were looking for, and it was not in the proposal,' Shrout said" (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 8).

Local issues rarely suffer such big defeats. Will states see here a message here about lopsided, road-dominated efforts?

Amtrak only needs \$1.2 million more to keep both trains running through June 30, 2003. A supplemental appropriation could be considered when the state legislature reconvenes in January. If funding is not increased, the *Mules'* last trips will be February 28, and all St. Louis-Kansas City trains will continue to run one coach short.

top management's negative attitude towards Amtrak—well known to UP dispatchers—is also a big factor.

Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF), by contrast, is proud of the incentive payments it earns for good Amtrak on-time performance. Dispatchers know this partly because one of the huge screens of data visible to all in BNSF's Fort Worth operations center is devoted to on-time performance data for Amtrak trains. The mostly BNSF *Empire Builder* is Amtrak's most reliable transcontinental run; the all-BNSF *Southwest Chief*—even though track work is scheduled around it—is hurt by a big complement of express cars, a business that Amtrak is carefully reevaluating.

Union Pacific is notable in two other ways. Based on contributions to federal candidates for the 18 months ending June 30, 2002—as reported in the *Washington Post* (August 7)—UP's corporate political action committee is the nation's 8th largest, and the only among the top 30 that belongs to a railroad.

Public Dollars for Rail Infrastructure

But UP lags in responding to the message from Wall Street and others—Court public infrastructure dollars to survive. Consider Don Phillips in July *Trains*, on the Alameda Corridor's opening (see box).

He wrote, "BNSF Chairman Matt Rose ...spent two days in L.A. for the ceremony, attending dinners and meetings and appearing on panels. Several BNSF office cars were parked at Union Station and later at the dedication site for parties and meetings. UP Chairman Dick Davidson, on the other hand, sent [a vice president] to speak...Davidson's absence was noted, sparking conversations about how difficult it was to deal with UP compared to BNSF...A top state official pointed out that more than \$100 million in public financing has been spent on BNSF lines in California recently, while UP has seen nothing. There may be a lesson here."

In fairness, Union Pacific has cooperated increasingly well with another joint powers authority—the one that runs Amtrak trains in the Capitol Corridor between Sacramento/Auburn and the Bay Area, and which is about to begin investing \$60 million to improve UP's double-track railroad for both passenger and freight. Even there, however, dispatching problems can be serious.

But recent management moves indicate

UP may be reevaluating the potential significance of passenger-related revenues and capital investments. For example, J. S. (Jerry) Wilmoth, former General Manager-Joint Facilities and Passenger Services in Omaha, was sent to Roseville, Cal., as General Manager-Network Infrastructure. His only charge is West Coast passenger services and working with the public agencies that sponsor them. ■

THE ALAMEDA CORRIDOR—inaugurated April 12—is a freight railroad in a 10-mile trench that dramatically improved rail access to the Port of Long Beach, while moving most trains off "three, slow, meandering branch lines" with many railroad/highway grade crossings.

The \$2.4-billion project was financed primarily by bonds sold by a joint powers authority—the Alameda Corridor Transportation Authority—created by the cities and ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. To pay off the bonds, the authority is charging "railroads and therefore, the shippers" \$15 per loaded container using the corridor (lower charge for empties).

Amtrak May Drop MBTA Contract

Amtrak told the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority that it will not bid to continue operating commuter trains under the terms of a "request for proposal" (RFP) that MBTA recently circulated.

With Amtrak believing its current MBTA contract is not profitable, it's no surprise that Amtrak is not bidding on a proposal that would be even less financially attractive. Moreover, the new proposal would give MBTA more control over Amtrak's ability to shift managers in the operation, while requiring Amtrak "to gamble on a five- or ten-year fixed price contract" (quote from Amtrak President David L. Gunn's July 30 letter to the MBTA explaining Amtrak's position).

Gunn urged continued Amtrak operation, dispatching, and maintenance of the electrified mainline in Massachusetts. Amtrak would continue that "at its own expense under a long-term agreement. Such agreement would also provide for continued operation of MBTA commuter trains to Providence." ■

Acela Express (from page 1)

commuter agencies. Metroliner service, which was being phased out, was restored to some slots.

Amtrak, Bombardier (the builder of the equipment), and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) are working to fix the problem. Bombardier has supplied slightly thicker brackets to replace broken ones, and with that temporary fix, Amtrak hoped (on August 16) that some Acela Express service could return the week of August 19, and full service the week of August 26. In the longer term, Bombardier will work on a redesign of the bracket that will require testing and FRA approval.

By August, Amtrak was working on a slightly reduced Acela Express schedule,

to deal with decreasing reliability of the new trains. Of the 18 sets in service, 15 were used on any given day, with three reserves. But in July, 35 departures were cancelled, and on-time performance, 74%, was the worst yet, all due to increasing mechanical problems (unrelated to the later cracking). Bombardier's repair of individual problems in such a way that none of the 18 sets are quite identical has complicated maintenance.

All the problems have called into question Amtrak's decision to buy "untested" technology, rather than buy European equipment "off-the-shelf." The practicality of doing so, however, is murky, given the extensive redesign that any European equipment would have required to meet U.S. safety standards.

Still, Acela Express is very popular with riders, when reliable. Fixable mechanical

problems, if properly addressed, ought not cast a shadow on the future of Acela Express in the Northeast, nor on higher-speed services elsewhere in the U.S. The reasons for developing such services—highway congestion, airport problems, energy consumption, etc.—remain present, despite what happened to Acela Express in August. ■

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Bikes/baggage—With Vermont no longer contributing to the cost of the baggage car on Amtrak's *Vermont*, it was removed by August 8. Thus, all points north of New Haven lose checked baggage service (except Springfield, which only has east-west service). Roll-on bike access in the Northeast, which had been increasing, but now is sharply less than a year ago.

Thruways—Concord Trailways connects with Amtrak *Downeaster* trains at Portland for other Maine points, since August 1. Three trips daily run non-stop to Bangor; two daily run along the coast. Other seasonal/Sunday/college service is offered.

ID'S AND AMTRAK TICKETING

One rule Amtrak adopted after September 11 prohibited station agents from selling tickets for persons not at the ticket window—not even family members (18 years or older) or business associates (Sept. '01 News).

NARP protested, citing severe inconvenience for prospective passengers and reduced Amtrak competitiveness. Amtrak then proposed a revision to let people purchase tickets for others. "ID REQUIRED" is stamped on the face of each ticket. (Though passengers are subject to random ticket/photo ID checks anyway, this stamp—by making clear that ID was not checked at time of

ticket sale—will make clear to station and train personnel the importance of checking ID when the person starts their trip.)

While the revised policy solved the "family-and-friend" problem, it threatened the group sales business by requiring a separate ticket for each group member. After NARP alerted Amtrak, the policy regarding group sales was modified to simply require group members to "present a valid photo ID to the Customer Service Station representative on the day of travel. Customer Services representative will match each name against the group listing or manifest."



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