



GAO Praises FRA's Grant Process

The Government Accountability Office praised the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) handling of High-Speed and Intercity Passenger Rail (HSIPR) grants for projects across the country since mid-2009. GAO is the investigative arm of Congress.

GAO said FRA "established a fair and objective approach for distributing these funds and substantially followed recommended [grantmaking] practices used throughout the government."

The report credits FRA, traditionally a safety oversight agency, with building a generally well-run grant program from scratch in just two years.

GAO found that "an application's technical review score was largely the basis for the selection deliberations."

Also, "FRA publicly communicated at least as much outcome information as all but one [of the] Recovery Act competitive grant programs we reviewed."

(continued on p. 2)

Amtrak Makes Case to House Appropriators

"I expect that trend [of strong ridership growth] to continue—and if gas prices continue to rise, to accelerate; our only restriction will be the available capacity."

--Amtrak President & CEO Joseph H. Boardman on April 9

The House Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development held a lengthy hearing on Amtrak's Fiscal 2012 funding request April 7. Amtrak's Joseph Boardman was the sole witness.

The civilized nature of the hearing contrasted sharply with the acrimonious budget fight and threat of a government shutdown that engulfed Washington at the time.

Many NARP members will be interested in the way Chairman Tom Latham (R-IA) closed the hearing. Acknowledging the difficult budgetary environment and that he could make no promises

Amtrak Ridership Just Keeps Growing

Amtrak announced that March was the 17th consecutive month of year-over-year ridership growth.

Ridership for the first half of Fiscal 2011 (Oct.-March) was 5.9% and 10.5% above the same months in FY 2010 and 2009, respectively.

Compared with 2010, the 2011 levels were up 3.9% in the Northeast Corridor, 7.7% for other short corridors and 5.3% for long-distance trains. This was in spite of a harsh Pacific Northwest winter in which mudslides "resulted in frequent track closures."

For all of FY 2010, record ridership of 28.7 million was 5.7% above FY

2009, and slightly above FY 2008 when, influenced by big gasoline price increases, Amtrak ridership rose 11.2% over the 2007 level. ■

Updated Amtrak ridership sheets by state, route, station and Congressional district, produced by NARP Council member Matt Fels, are at www.bit.ly/amstats.



-Malcolm Kenton

Passengers board southbound Amtrak San Joaquin train 704 at Sacramento, CA, on Apr. 23. This train was nearly sold out.

2011 Budget Zeroes High-Speed Rail

Amtrak Capital Reduced

The law that funds the federal government through Sept. 30 zeroes out the popular High-Speed and Intercity Passenger Rail (HSIPR) grant program. It even rescinds (cancels) \$400 million of previously appropriated HSIPR funds.

Now, U.S. DOT has just \$2 billion in old HSIPR funds left to distribute.

Amtrak's capital grant is cut \$78 million below the 2010 level. The transit New Starts program is \$502 million below 2010.

"With gas prices soaring above \$4 per gallon, cutting funding to passenger trains and transit is bad policy that will hurt American families," NARP's Ross Capon said in a statement. "We plan on working with Congress and the President to make sure that the newly-established

(continued on p. 4)

about the outcome, Latham told Boardman, "Amtrak will always have a warm spot in my heart. When I was dating my wife—well, she was my girlfriend then, thank goodness she is my wife now—she lived in Northeast Colorado, in Brush. I used to get on Amtrak on a Friday night in Osceola [IA] and get off at Fort Morgan [CO] at about 7:00 in the morning to visit her."

Here are a few hearing highlights:

- **Steve LaTourette (R-OH)** continues as a strong Amtrak supporter. He reminded colleagues that, over the past 37 years, the federal government has invested one trillion dollars in highways, \$421 billion in aviation, and just \$36 billion in Amtrak. Later in the hearing, he said funds Amtrak has gotten "pale in comparison to what the other modes have gotten." He called Amtrak's strong ridership growth "proof in the pudding" that Amtrak is doing well. "I

(continued on p. 2)

Moreover, GAO said praise for FRA also came from state agencies which applied for the grants. Applicants praised FRA officials for providing comprehensive information and for answering questions during the periods leading up to deadlines.



FRA Administrator Joseph Szabo

GAO did have some critical comments, as the report's title suggests: "Recording Clearer Reasons for Awards Decisions Would Improve Otherwise Good Grantmaking Practices."

GAO said FRA "recorded general reasons for selecting applications and publicly posted broad descriptions of the selected projects. However, the documented reasons for [FRA's] decisions were typically vague or restated the criteria listed in the funding announcement." It also said, "Decision rationales provided little insight into selections."

For its part, FRA said it "worked hard to ensure that the program was both thorough in its evaluation of project merits and fair in its decision making."

To date, about \$5.7 billion dollars in HSIPR funds have been obligated nationwide for projects funded by the Recovery Act and by regular, annual appropriations. ■

GAO Report 11-283 is at <http://1.usa.gov/gaofra> [PDF]

TRAVELER'S ADVISORY

General Amtrak timetable changes take effect May 1. Some key changes:

- Northbound *Silver Meteor* departs Miami 20 minutes earlier; overall run time 11 minutes shorter.
- Northbound *Carolinian* and mid-day Raleigh-bound *Piedmont* (#74) depart Charlotte 30 mins. earlier.
- Eastbound *Capitol Ltd.* leaves Chicago 30 minutes earlier due to CSX tunnel work Pittsburgh-Washington.
- Westbound *Cardinal* leaves Washington 5 minutes earlier. Eastbound trip lengthened 15 minutes.

have great faith in Joe Boardman. I had great faith in Joe when he was [Federal Railroad] Administrator."

• **John Carter (R-TX)** asked about high Northeast Corridor fares. Boardman: "We charge the maximum we can so that we minimize our cost to the taxpayer." LaTourrette: "If Amtrak charged lower fares and required more taxpayer dollars, we'd be criticizing them about that, too."

• **Carter** said he had taken Amtrak from Austin to Washington when his doctor wouldn't let him fly. He had a good experience. He also got the impression that the overnight trains are heavily used by retirees.

• **John Oliver (D-MA)**, the ranking member, was impressed with the fact that 43% of Amtrak's disabled passengers use the overnight trains. He found this "startling," since so many of the stations along those routes are not ADA-compliant. Boardman emphasized that Amtrak handles lots of disabled passengers at stations that are not ADA-compliant.

• **Steve Womack (R-AR)** said he had not ridden Amtrak. He is from northwestern Arkansas, which Amtrak does not serve, although Boardman noted the potential for Thruway bus linkage between that corner of the state and the *Texas Eagle*. Womack expressed some skepticism about the value of the *Eagle*.

• **Mario Diaz-Balart (R-FL)** wondered why freight railroads could make a profit and Amtrak cannot. He also asked whether Amtrak could get rid of "those routes that don't make a profit."

• **Oliver** wondered what would happen with Amtrak in a government shutdown, which loomed at the time. Boardman: "We see ourselves being able to operate for an additional month," because Amtrak gets 75% of its revenue from passengers and another 10% from things like leases at Philadelphia 30th Street and New York Penn Stations.

Oliver asked about the status of Amtrak's fleet plan. Boardman: "As I said at a NARP meeting, responding to critics, isn't it great that you have a fleet plan to criticize? Until 2010, there wasn't one."

Oliver asked if there was a manufacturing base in the U.S. Boardman mentioned CAF-USA, which is building the 130 single-level cars. He also said, "we've been debating whether Superliners need to be replaced or simply overhauled."

• **Charlie Dent (R-PA)** rides Amtrak. He

asked about the top speed "this side of New York." Boardman: "135 mph. We would need power, signal, track and catenary improvements to go faster."



Boardman on Apr. 9

• **Marcy Kaptur (D-OH)** said she "comes from a part of the country where we love railroads... How do you look at the relationship with VIA Rail Canada, and with the freight railroads? Your ridership growth is impressive. It means your people are working really hard, especially with old equipment. We want to thank your people."

There also was discussion about Amtrak's seemingly high overtime costs. Boardman said this was largely a function of staff shortages and the fact that much of the work must be performed within a short timespan, often on short notice.

However, he also said that Amtrak had made changes aimed at better management of overtime. ■

AMTRAK'S TOP PRIORITIES

Asked to identify Amtrak's "bare-bones" 2012 capital needs, Boardman gave the following list.

- \$350m - NEC safety
- \$250m - overhauls of cars and locomotives
- \$175m to continue Americans with Disabilities Act work at current levels
- \$63m to continue the 130-car acquisition
- \$17m - reservation system upgrades ("need to continue")
- \$12m - labor management system
- \$17m - Fix the garage where cement is falling at Philadelphia's 30th Street Station
- \$12m - Upgrades to Chicago Union Station

Add \$271 million for debt service, to avoid defaulting on leases, and the capital+debt service total is \$1,167 million.

Federal HSR Rail Program: Bipartisan Appeal

The *New York Times* in an April 21 editorial said 11 Republican governors are seeking more federal rail funds. The editorial lambasted Congress for dramatic cuts in the High Speed and Intercity Passenger Train program.

Notable among the grant applications, which were due April 4: **Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker**, who famously rejected funds for Milwaukee-Madison, wants \$150 mill. for Chicago-Milwaukee; **New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie** requested \$570 million to replace the century-old Portal Bridge (December News).

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood on April 8 reported obligating over \$300

million for previously announced grants. The biggest went to Washington State, Maryland, Connecticut, New Jersey and California.

Missouri's \$3.8 million would fund improvements at 13 grade crossings west of Sedalia, preliminary work for a second main track (Lee's Summit-Pleasant Hill) and development of a State Rail Plan.

New York gets \$3.3 million to "add track and rail capacity" near Ballston Spa. This will improve reliability of the *Adirondack* and *Ethan Allen Express*. ■

FRA's release for the NY grant is at 1.usa.gov/frany; release covering the rest is at 1.usa.gov/411fra

Govs. Walker (left) and Christie (official photos)



THIS YEAR'S AWARDS

NARP's Golden Spike Award this year goes to Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME), Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-NY) and Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-ME). The first NARP Academic Award goes to Dr. Vukan Vuchic, emeritus of the University of Pennsylvania. The Dr. Gary Burch Memorial Safety Award, presented by the Burch Family, goes to J. Blair Slaughter, Amtrak Principal Engineer, Industrial Design. Stay tuned!

VICTORIES IN N.C., MISSOURI

State legislators in Missouri and North Carolina rejected attempts to block the use of federal High-Speed and Intercity Passenger Rail (HSIPR) funds.

N.C. State Rep. Ric Killian (R-Mecklenburg) introduced a bill to prohibit the state from accepting HSIPR funds without legislative approval. But after citizens pushed back, state Sen. Bob Rucho (R-Mecklenburg) told a business group that his party "will support the \$545 million" in federal funds awarded last month to modernize the Raleigh-Charlotte corridor (*Charlotte Business Journal*, Apr. 8).

The House Transportation Committee Apr. 19 approved an amendment to Killian's bill. The result is that NCDOT is simply required to notify the legislature of the use of such grants. Some Republicans joined all committee Democrats in supporting the amendment.

The bill next goes to the House Commerce Committee, then to the full House. Further amendments are still possible. **North Carolinians should call their state Representatives.**

In Missouri, State Sen. Jim Lembke (R-St. Louis) moved to strip from the state budget \$37 million in Recovery Act funds for improvements to the St. Louis-Kansas City corridor. The amendment was voted down in a Senate committee.

Report: Florida HSR Would Have Turned Profit

A few weeks after Gov. Scott canceled the Tampa-Orlando high-speed rail project, two consulting firms completed a study saying that the line would have been profitable by its first year.

The system would have generated \$62.9 million in revenue in its first year of operation (2015) resulting in a \$10.24 million profit, according to the findings. Florida DOT released the study in early March. Since Scott canceled the project

Feb. 16, the study is being delivered to the Federal Railroad Administration.

The study found more people expressing a preference for high-speed rail than did a 2009 report, causing a jump in projected ridership and revenue.

South Carolina-based Wilbur Smith Associates and international firm Steer Davies Gleave undertook the study. ■

Source: Engineering News-Record Southeast (www.bit.ly/flhsr)

Builder Faces High Water in North Dakota

North Dakota has had an unusually wet spring. "Heavy rain and blizzards have caused eight rivers in the state to swell to flood levels" (*Scientific American*, March 25). This has caused problems for Amtrak's *Empire Builder* both on the regular route through Devils Lake, Grand Forks, and Rugby, and on those occasions when it has used BNSF's alternate route through New Rockford.

At this writing, it seemed likely that a rising Devils Lake could soon force BNSF to declare its bridge near Churchs Ferry (photo, Oct. 2010 News) impassable. BNSF says that Amtrak is the only user of a 17-mile segment that includes this bridge.

The State of North Dakota is constructing a pumping station designed to reduce the lake's level by one foot. However, this is to become operational sometime during 2012. That could be long after Amtrak has implemented what it calls a

suspension of service and a temporary reroute of the *Empire Builder*.

A study conducted for BNSF by Barr Engineering (<http://1.usa.gov/ndbridge>) found a \$77 million price tag for raising the bridge, and \$22 million net cost of replacing jointed rail on the line. State or federal funds would be required. The work would take two years to complete. The possibility exists that the \$77 million might be lowered, for example, if the pumping station works and eliminates the need to raise the track level.

Amtrak has begun qualifying its crews to operate through New Rockford over the Surrey Cutoff (a.k.a. "K.O. Subdivision"). This is BNSF's Fargo-Minot mainline and is 45 miles shorter than the route through Grand Forks. There are no passenger facilities at New Rockford, much less ADA compliant ones. Connecting buses will serve the missed stops for at least the first month of a detour. ■



Robert J. Stewart, Chairman; John Delora, Albert L. Papp, Jr., Arthur Poole, David Randall, Vice Chairs; Stephen J. Salatti, Secretary; Kenneth T. Clifford, Treasurer

Ross B. Capon, President & CEO; Sean Jeans-Gail, Vice President; Malcolm M. Kenton, Director of Outreach & Engagement; Mary Beth McCall, Coordinator of Resource Development; Lawrence E. Scott, Special Assistant to the Chairman.

National Association of Railroad Passengers *NARP News* (ISSN 0739-3490), published monthly (except Nov.) by NARP; 505 Capitol Ct. NE, Suite 300; Washington, DC 20002-7706; 202/408-8362, fax 202/408-8287, narp@narprail.org, www.narprail.org. ©2011 National Assoc. of Railroad Passengers. All rights reserved. Membership dues \$35/year (\$20/student, \$25/senior), of which \$5 is a subscription to *NARP News*. Periodicals Postage Paid at Washington, D.C., and at additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send address changes to National Association of Railroad Passengers *NARP News*; 505 Capitol Ct. NE, Suite 300; Washington, DC 20002-7706.

(This has news through April 27. Vol. 45, No. 4 was mailed April 13.)



our mission: a modern, customer-focused national passenger train network that provides a travel choice americans want.

NARP Files Comments For Two House Hearings

“The importance of passenger train development...is underlined now as gasoline prices again are driving up Amtrak ridership and leaving too many Americans without access to trains and with less freedom to travel. That is in part because the U.S. gasoline pump price, with its relatively low gasoline tax, is extraordinarily sensitive to fluctuations in world oil prices.”

That is how NARP Pres. Ross Capon began his statement for the record in the House Railroads Subcommittee’s March 11 hearing on “Finding Ways to Encourage and Increase Private Sector Participation in Passenger Rail Service.”

NARP defended U.S. DOT’s intercity passenger train grants, and underlined that “Amtrak has a great advantage over other carriers...their ability to provide liability for passenger rail service and their statutory right of access to operate over freight lines” (quoting written testimony of NC DOT’s Patrick Simmons).

Capon’s statement for the subcommittee’s April 7 hearing on reducing regulatory burdens included recommendations on how a restored “Build America Bonds” program could be more train—and passenger-train—friendly.

We supported a flexible, “sliding scale” approach to Buy America requirements.

We listed issues on which we agree with the railroads:

- The Section 130 grade crossing “set aside” program should be retained;
- The rehabilitation tax credit for short line railroads should be extended;
- Any new passenger-related liability law

should not be retroactive;

- The freeze on longer/heavier trucks should be extended to the entire National

Highway System. ■

NARP’s full statements are at www.bit.ly/tiregs and www.bit.ly/pvtsect

Modern Train Board for Washington Main Hall



- Malcolm Kenton

After a long hiatus, train information in late March was restored to the majestic main hall in Washington Union Station. A similar digital board has replaced the Solari “flip board” at Baltimore’s Penn Station. Philadelphia, Newark and New Haven Solaris will be replaced next.

Current Year Funding

from page 1

‘zero baseline’ for the high-speed rail program does not stand in the 2012 budget process.”

For the last round of HSIPR funds, states that met the April 4 deadline constituted half of the United States, and well over half its population, including 11

states with Republican governors (see p. 3).

It’s partly up to you to see that HSIPR gets funded in FY 2012. Contact your representatives by calling 202-224-3121 or by going to act.narprail.org. Urge friends to do the same. ■