Surfliner 762 arrives at Van Nuys new platform on the official opening day, January 16, 2020

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Amtrak’s Richard Adams (l) talks with SCRRA Chair Brian Humphries, Metrolink CEO Stephanie Wiggins in background.

UK Victorian Infrastructure on the GWR Birmingham line - Ian Leech
Greetings!
In early January, members of the RailPAC Board developed options and came to a consensus on RailPAC’s policy priorities for 2020. The two major ground rules were that the priorities had to be focused and actionable in 2020. A list of about a dozen initiatives was narrowed down to four key priorities with two additional initiatives RailPAC will be following, but don’t appear to require RailPAC to take the lead. RailPAC can offer support if the opportunity arises.

The four key 2020 RailPAC priorities are:

Surfliner Service Crisis and Vision – The recent collapse of the cliff at Del Mar clearly shows the threat of rising sea levels and more intense storms to Surfliner/Coaster service. There is no future for the Surfliner/Coaster route at its current location. Given the magnitude of relocation project, it needs to start now. The collapse of the cliff at Del Mar is not the only threat. The route is also threatened by the same forces at San Clemente. In addition, the Surfliner route has not developed an expansive vision that would deal with both the climate change issue along with dramatically re-imaging the rail line as a faster, electrified, high-frequency, high capacity service that would incent transit oriented development, generate maximum ridership and contribute to enhancing travel capacity within the Southern California megaregion. Southern California RailPAC’s members are focused on calling attention to the immediate threat to the route as well as championing the development of a robust long-term vision of a high-performance auto competitive passenger rail system.

California High Speed Rail Funding Strategy – Even though this initiative is one to watch rather than take the lead, Board members clearly felt it had high importance because of the magnitude of the HSR program. This initiative is both complex and challenging. It is challenging because, unlike most discussions which often take place at the staff level (which RailPAC can influence with information), the high-speed rail funding discussion is taking place at the highest levels of the Newsom administration and legislature. Add in the attempted “claw back” of funds from the administration in Washington and as legislators on both sides make their cases or work behind the scenes for a compromise. RailPAC will keep members updated and stand ready to weigh in on this issue at the appropriate time.

Daily Sunset Campaign – One thing I think all RailPAC members can agree on is tri-weekly service for a long-distance train route generates sub-par ridership and ticket revenue results. So not surprisingly, this initiative was identified as a key priority for RailPAC in 2020. Building on the grassroots outreach over the past few years by advocates along the I-10 corridor, 2020 will see a new phase of the daily Sunset Limited campaign. Details are outlined in an article on page XX of this issue of Steel Wheels.

SCORE/Metrolink Vision – SCORE, Southern California Optimized Rail Expansion program, is a $10 billion capital program that will upgrade the Metrolink system, adding additional tracks, grade separations, signal work and investments to facilitate zero-emissions operations. Currently Metrolink is working on rail operations modeling; development of design alternatives, identifying and prioritizing proposed capacity improvements, undertaking preliminary engineering and the environmental assessment for the proposed projects. SCORE service goals would deliver faster, more reliable service with greater frequencies system wide and high frequencies within the core network. This initiative will be championed by RailPAC’s Southern California members. Near-term goals for these members are the timely completion of the third main track Hobart to Fullerton including the Fullerton interlocking project, double tracking of the Antelope Valley and Ventura lines in the San Fernando Valley, and a new station at Pacoima.

Initiatives being Monitored
Several initiatives proposed as 2020 priorities were not rated as highly as the others listed above but they still are important. These are:

Dumbarton Transportation Corridor (Dumbarton Bridge) – The Dumbarton Transportation Corridor is a critical connection linking San Joaquin Valley and East Bay housing to job centers in southern San Mateo County and northern Santa Clara County. The current highway bridge is at or near capacity with job growth continuing. Building a replacement rail line and bridge utilizing the current rail right-of-way would add substantial cross bay capacity to this corridor while facilitating connections and/or direct service from several transit
operators – Bay Rapid Transit District (BART), Caltrain, Capitol Corridor and Altamont Commuter Rail (ACE). From the transit perspective the lack of service on this corridor represents a critical gap in network connectivity. Because of these benefits, RailPAC considers this an important priority. Currently the project is undergoing the Environmental Review Process so advocacy opportunities are limited until the report draft is completed. RailPAC’s Northern California members will be monitoring this project.

**Mental Health/Homelessness/Security** – For riders on intercity and commuter rail their “final mile” is most likely on transit and/or walking. In addition to being concerned about this as a social justice issue, RailPAC members are also concerned about how mental health and homelessness impacts the perception of security both on-board and around transit stations. This perception results in lower ridership and thus reduces the community benefits from the large investments in transit systems. There appear to be several initiatives underway in Sacramento in an attempt to address these issues. While RailPAC has no expertise to offer solutions to mental health and homelessness, RailPAC can comment on the impacts of failing to address these issues. RailPAC will stand ready to support any legislative action around these issues.

**Freight Rail Carrier Cost Shifting** – This priority focuses on actual and proposed changes in rail freight operations, long-mega trains and single person operator freight trains that potentially have significant negative public impacts. The issue is not so much the changes to operations, but the implementation of these changes without the investments by the freight railroads to mitigate the potential public impacts of these changes i.e. blocked crossings and delays to passenger trains. In effect the freight railroads are shifting the costs of these operational changes, which should be internal and borne by the carriers, to the general public. While RailPAC has no expertise in the specifics of rail freight operations and investments to mitigate the negative impact of these operational changes, RailPAC can attest to the public costs of these changes. RailPAC will stand ready to support any legislative action around these issues...

Steve Roberts, President
From Charles Dickens, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness…” This quote applies to the current state of the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART) operation serving its namesake counties.

Sonoma and Marin Counties account for less than 2% of California’s population. In spite of the small size, voters in 2008 approved a quarter cent sales tax to fund building the 70-mile SMART rail system and parallel bicycle/pedestrian trail from Cloverdale in northern Sonoma County to the Golden Gate Ferry terminal at Larkspur Landing in Marin County. The project was originally projected to cost $541 million. The 2009 Great Recession caused sales tax revenue to fall below expectations and the economic recovery caused increased construction costs. With revenue and costs not meeting projections SMART cut back original construction and operations to a 43-mile route from Santa Rosa to San Rafael. To date about $600 million has been spent on the 43-mile route and a 2-mile extension to Larkspur Landing. Operations began in August 2017.

SMART proved very popular with the public carrying just shy of 1.5 million riders in its first two years. The trains run early morning through mid-day and into evening hours. On Time Performance is excellent. The Diesel Multiple Unit (DMU) equipment is comfortable and maintained so well it still looks new after two and a half years of use. Four additional new DMUs were put into service in 2019. More can be purchased in the future from manufacturer Nippon Sharyo. In December 2019 SMART opened a two-mile extension south from San Rafael to Larkspur Landing connecting with ferry service to San Francisco. It is too soon to tell how popular the extension will be. One data point, however, on Monday of Christmas week I rode a late morning train to Larkspur Landing and encountered at least 30 passengers making the ferry connection. Starting in January SMART increased service from 17 to 19 round trips per weekday. Funding has been obtained for a 3-mile extension northward to the Town of Windsor slated for completion in 2021. We are in the best of times.

SMART has also encountered financial problems and is running cash negative eating into reserves. Without some changes SMART will run out of money and cut back or cease operation. SMART will be asking voters in March 2020 to extend the quarter cent sales tax expiring in 2028, another 30 years to 2058. This will allow SMART to refinance debt, reduce monthly payments, and become cash positive. The vote requires a 2/3 majority to pass. This will be difficult to achieve because the 2008 measure promised a full 70-mile train and bicycle trail. The sales tax extension will only provide operating funds and will not provide the additional $400 million estimated for constructing the remainder of the train and trail system. In other words, voters are being asked to extend a tax that hasn’t met its promises and still won’t even with the extension. We are in the worst of times.

Sonoma and Marin Counties are very environmentally conscious. The counties endure some of the worst traffic congestion in Northern California and their progressive population wants to see transportation alternatives that don’t require an automobile. SMART serves well the route 101 corridor where the bulk of the population resides. SMART trains carry passengers with bicycles at no extra charge which provides good first and last mile connectivity. SMART is fully ADA compatible and handles many wheelchairs. SMART provides a very good non-auto alternative. We are in the age of wisdom.

The recently opened extension allowing transfer to the San Francisco ferry is much less than ideal. The train station is approximately a half mile from the ferry terminal necessitating a 15-minute walk. The story I heard was the City of Larkspur would not permit the train right of way to get closer to the ferry terminal because that would mean losing some parking spaces in the terminal parking lot. An example of the automobile taking precedence over public transportation. Two half-mile walks every day, especially in the rainy weather we often have in winter, is not a good way to encourage people to use public transportation. Also, SMART train schedules don’t connect well with the ferry schedule. Only 11 of 38 weekday trains connect within a 15 to 30 minute connect time. We are in the age of foolishness.

SMART has proven to do many, but not all, things right. I encourage SMART Board and staff to continue with what it does right to make this the best of times and try to improve what falls into the worst of times category.
SMART Discloses Ridership Data Exposing Trends: The Expected, The Encouraging and The Discouraging - Dick Spotswood

This column originally appeared in the Marin Independent Journal and is reprinted with permission. Support your local paper! Dick Spotswood is a RailPAC member and former Board Secretary.

SMART, the Sonoma-Marin Area Rail Transit District, has now released its ridership statistics pursuant to my California Public Document Act request. Previously, the agency had been reluctant to divulge numbers regularly provided by other U.S transit agencies. In the end, wise minds prevailed and the statistics are available for public view on SMART’s website.

Transparency is always a virtue. That’s especially true where a ballot measure looms, in this case Measure I on the Marin and Sonoma March 3 ballots. That measure will continue the rail agency’s current one-quarter-cent sales tax for another 30 years. Ridership data is contained in a December report prepared by the firm of Corey, Canapary & Galanis. Transit agencies like SMART are annually mandated to perform an outside review of data submitted to the National Transit Database.

A quick look at the ridership data presents the expected, the encouraging and the discouraging.

Expected: Ridership weekday ridership averaging about 2,400 daily is about 40% of what was projected by 2025 for the Larkspur-Northern Santa Rosa segment in 2008 when Measure Q, the sales tax measure funding the train’s operation obtained its needed two-thirds supermajority. Planners then well understood it takes time for transit to build consistent ridership. The early modeling was based on expected travel eight years after inauguration of the full system.

Weekend ridership is about 800 a day, a bit above projection. The dominant travel mode is weekday peak period Central and Southern Sonoma County commuters headed south to Marin jobs. That’s exactly what SMART was designed to accomplish.

Encouraging: Travel on the San Rafael-Larkspur extension had just commenced when the outside review was winding down. My own personal experience including a ride this past Wednesday is that ridership is doing well. Anecdotally, the train’s on-board ticker inspector told me on some runs 150 passengers often detrain in Larkspur mostly headed to the ferry terminal.

The figures show off-peak and weekend travel has potential for significant increases. Off-peak midday travel is a win-win for transit. The cost of running midday service is nominal. Labor, transit’s largest expense, is already on the payroll. Essentially the only avoidable cost is fuel and wear-and-tear.

Discouraging: Travel from two of Novato’s three rail stations is consistently low. This may be the result of Novato’s city council, not transit planners, selecting station locations. The North Novato/San Marin’s depot’s rationale was adjacency to the once bustling Fireman’s Fund Insurance headquarters. “The Fund” is now defunct and the complex is vacant. Ridership from South Novato’s Hamilton, the site of SMART’s largest parking lot, is anemic. It’s due to low employment in the area and its closeness to San Rafael, Hamilton’s lead destination. It’s just easier to drive to the Mission City from Hamilton.

Public relations lesson: Don’t overpromise. SMART nor anything else will “solve” traffic chaos on Highway 101. There is no panacea. As long as the North Bay’s economy continues to prosper, more people will come to live and work here, overwhelming U.S. 101, the North Bay’s main street. The best transit can accomplish is providing civilized and faster alternatives.

Explain and educate: In today’s polarized 24-hour news cycle, explaining boring realities is difficult. The reality is that it takes time to build ridership on any new transit line whatever the mode.

In Marin, the best analogy to SMART is the now wildly popular Golden Gate Ferry routes from Larkspur to San Francisco. In its first full year of service, ridership was 1.1 million. It hit a peak during the 1979 fuel crisis and plummeted in 1984, prompting worries about the ferries’ future. It then gradually rebounded. Today the Larkspur-San Francisco ferries carry 1.64 million travelers - a North Bay success story.
As most readers know, there is enough population along the five-state route of the Sunset Ltd. to justify daily service. Daily service would clearly benefit all of the cities and towns along the route. Daily service would dramatically improve the value of the service to residents who would no longer have to plan their trips around which day it currently operates, or be forced to use more expensive or less comfortable alternatives. Daily service is especially valuable for travelers making shorter trips, 300 – 500 miles, where the stay at the destination is often shorter than for longer trips. Daily service is especially beneficial to smaller towns with limited motor coach and airline service. In addition, previous demand studies and actual observed results on other routes have found that converting from tri-weekly to daily operation results in greater ridership, greater ticket revenues and improved revenue to cost ratio.

Building on prior outreach and stakeholder contacts in online communities, this spring will see a new focused effort by Daily Sunset Campaign supporters. The foundations of this effort are twofold. The first is the completion and roll-out of an economic study, sponsored by the Rail Passengers Association, of the positive impacts of the daily operation of the Sunset Ltd. This study, using tools developed by the Trent Lott National Center at the University of Southern Mississippi, utilizes past Amtrak studies, Amtrak Sunset Ltd ridership and ticket revenue statistics, state travel data and US government regional economic forecasts. The Daily Sunset Ltd Study will provide estimates of the economic and social impacts of operating the Sunset Limited daily. It will also outline the economic losses if, as a result of poor performance due to continued tri-weekly operation, the Sunset Limited is discontinued. Further, the study will illustrate the economic benefits at the state and county levels for the five states (west to east), California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and Louisiana. If the study findings for the daily Sunset Ltd mirror the results of other routes, the economic value of the Sunset Ltd to the cities and states served will far exceed the Federal funds needed to operate the service.

At first glance this would seem to argue for the immediate change of the Sunset Ltd. to daily service. In fact, Amtrak proposed daily operation in 2010 after the Sunset/Texas Eagle Performance Improvement Plan showed the positive ridership and ticket revenue impacts of daily operation. There is a challenge however. Union Pacific’s Sunset Route is one of its core routes linking the California with Midwest, mid-south and southern cities and industries. Two lines connect with the Sunset Route at West Colton while it connects with three lines at El Paso. Freight volume is heavy and growing along this rail line. While Union Pacific has invested in many track capacity projects over the years, rail freight traffic growth has continued apace putting a strain on the Route.

Despite these capacity investments, chokepoints still remain. Until they are addressed, a reliable daily Sunset Ltd cannot be operated. Complicating the equation is the fact that these capacity bottlenecks are system congestion points associated with the overall level of freight traffic and not specifically related to intercity passenger rail service. As a result it is not fair to fund these capacity projects out of funds appropriated for passenger service resulting in fewer intercity passenger rail investments elsewhere.

Another challenge that increases the initial cost of additional intercity passenger service is provision of future capacity along the route. Under the current requirements the freight railroad gets “one bite at the apple”. Not only must Amtrak fund passenger related capacity projects needed to start the service, the freight railroad also requires funding based on estimates
of future capacity needs decades in the future. This was one reason why Union Pacific’s initial capital request as a result of the 2010 study was near a billion dollars. Many commuter rail carriers address this long-term capacity issue with ongoing capital access charges.

To more thoroughly analyze this issue a second high-level but more focused study will be the next step. This second independent study will analyze capacity issues along the rail route. It will evaluate the capacity needs required for expanded rail service along the I-10 corridor. This study is a key priority because the goal for the Rail Passengers Association, RailPAC, Daily Sunset Campaign and other stakeholders is to develop, in cooperation with the Union Pacific RR, a consensus group of capacity investments needed to reliably operate the Sunset Ltd daily. Also determined will be the passenger specific, network specific and longer-term capacity investments needed.

These studies will give stakeholders the information they can use as a guide in evaluating the current situation and as an aid in developing strategies to address the key challenges of this initiative. One of the advantages of an independent capacity study is that it will bring a level of confidence for the stakeholders in outlining the projects needed for continued economic and industrial growth along the I-10 corridor. A second goal is to raise overall civic awareness of the value of this corridor for freight and passenger traffic and the mutual benefit from increasing its capacity. These strategies would also include efforts to develop public/private partnerships to increase the overall capacity of the Sunset Route.

The model for moving beyond the analysis phase is the strategy stakeholders used on the Southwest Chief route. Rail service supporters, local and state civic leaders, Amtrak and the freight railroad partnered to develop a group of targeted investments, committed to a local match and applied for matching Federal transportation funds. This partnership strategy also addresses another issue. Currently capacity issues, known to the Union Pacific, are not addressed because their benefit, at current traffic levels, falls below the internal rate of return compared to other capacity projects on UP’s system. In addition, some projects may have a high public benefit component and a lower railroad operating benefit (i.e. grade separations, etc.). So the project is postponed.

Bringing in public funding, especially for projects with significant public or local economic benefits, changes the benefit to cost ratio by leveraging UP’s contribution thus changing UP’s internal rate of return for the project.

Over the past several years the Daily Sunset Campaign has been contacting local civic, business, public officials, state and Congressional leaders with the daily Sunset Ltd message and asking for and getting their support. Thus the overall message has been spread. The next step, using the Sunset Ltd economic study, is to demonstrate to stakeholders, “what’s in it for my community/state”. With the strong economic benefit message, the Daily Sunset Campaign can start soliciting local commitments, first for the Sunset Ltd Capacity Study and then for the network capacity projects just as was done in Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico.

Finally, I plan to provide a summary of the daily Sunset Ltd. economic study in the 2nd Quarter Steel Wheels. If you want an example of such a study you can view the “Impacts from a Second Train to Minnesota”. See web address below:

https://www.railpassengers.org/site/assets/files/5819/rpa_research_note--new_train_to_mn.pdf

The Sunset Limited heads east through the Business End of the Sunset Route, Colton, CA. Trains pass here to and from Chicago, Memphis, Dallas and Ft. Worth, Houston and the Gulf and California. Charles Freericks
A Tale of Two Railroads

Los Angeles – San Diego and London – Birmingham Intercity Passenger Services

By Line - Paul Dyson

Some Comparisons

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<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>Los Angeles to San Diego</th>
<th>London to Birmingham</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Route Miles</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population of Combined Metropolitan Areas</td>
<td>13M</td>
<td>11.7 M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak Hour Frequency</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Hourly Frequency</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fastest Trip</td>
<td>2hr 55min</td>
<td>1hr 22min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuality</td>
<td>75% within 5 minutes</td>
<td>70% within 5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Train Speed</td>
<td>43mph</td>
<td>81mph</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I looked at this topic seven years ago to prompt a certain amount of envy. The size of the metropolitan areas and the distance between them was too tempting a comparison to pass up. While we have made some progress in terms of numbers of trains on the corridor south of Los Angeles, the journey times have not improved since Amtrak took over in 1971. Much of the reason for the poor state of the railroads in California is that when built they linked small (but growing) communities. The prime focus was to stake a claim to the franchise rather than worry about competitive journey times. There really was no competition.

In 1850 Birmingham had a population of 232,000, by 1900 522,000. In contrast, San Diego was a “village” of 17,000 in 1900, and Los Angeles only 100,000. Now of course the respective conurbations are almost identical in size. The urban cores are denser in the UK, but actual density is surprisingly high in California. What’s missing in California is the developed network of urban rail systems of all kinds, especially compared to London. This greatly increases the likelihood of travelers to use rail.

The London – Birmingham Railway was the first mainline of more than 100 miles in the UK. While the line was not as straight as it might have been, due to diversions to avoid the estates of wealthy landowners, nevertheless it was much more highly engineered compared to the California line with plenty of cuttings, embankments, tunnels and viaducts. The engineers recognized the limitations of the locomotives of the day! They also boasted of the amount of earth that had been moved to keep the route as level as possible. In contrast, even in recent times, US railroads thought nothing of “doubling” a hill, i.e. splitting a train into two halves, pulling it uphill in two pieces and putting it back together. They paid in higher operating costs and slower journeys rather than up front capital.

The point I’m making is that the Los Angeles – San Diego coast route was laid out and constructed for a different time and a different purpose. It moved the traffic available with an adequate level of service without a crushing debt from a high capital cost, but it did so by sacrificing speed.

If we’re serious about accomplishing anything close to the UK levels of service between similar conurbations we must recognize that many of today’s legacy routes are, at least in part, no longer fit for purpose. We need at minimum some new alignments bypassing the slowest sections and the single-track bottlenecks. You will see from the table that the Los Angeles San Diego rail mileage is 128. My very rough estimate using new bypass tracks is 115, bringing a two-hour journey time within reach.

Is there the will to make these investments? Although the electorate voted for a High-Speed Rail System, the LOSSAN route was not part of the proposal. The inland route via Riverside County is Phase Two of the HSR project, which effectively puts it on an unlit back burner. To accomplish any radical improvement in journey times between the State’s largest cities will take a completely new approach to the problem, and a coalition of politicians and organizations that recognize the opportunity and are willing to take a long term view to achieve the desired outcome. RailPAC will be in the forefront of educating elected officials and the public of the need for early action. Time and tide wait for no one.
Boost Passenger Rail Efficiency

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Coast Comments

The last Steel Wheels of 2019 drew attention to the Coast Line, and whether we can make the erosion problems into an opportunity for improving the route for higher speeds. I’m deeply indebted to RailPAC member Mike McGinley, former SP and Metrolink Chief Civil Engineer, for some more detailed information about the line north of Los Angeles. Mike writes:

Ventura to Surf: In the 1920s the Southern Pacific constructed large concrete seawalls at the base of cliffs supporting the track at perhaps 20 locations. Most of them are still completely functional and there is basically no history of slides above them. There have been slides where there were gaps in the seawalls. These seawalls incidentally protect Highway 101 which would be at risk if the railroad were washed out.

Just north of Ventura and north of Carpenteria the line is directly on the beach, supported by sand, not unlike the situation at San Clemente. In these areas the Southern Pacific and now UP routinely place large blocks of stone rip-rap to prevent waves from eroding the embankment, generally to complete success although periodic replacement of rip-rap is needed. There was one request by the coastal people, to use natural stone instead of concrete because shards of reinforcing steel exposed when concrete breaks up posed a hazard to recreation beach users. (The SP had been placing discarded precast concrete items as rip-rap).

Elkhorn Slough: Elkhorn Slough is probably the most vulnerable location in my opinion. I have seen high tide to the top of the ties as the southbound Starlight passed through at restricted speed. The embankment is built upon soft organic sediments that are probably decomposing and settling, lowering the track elevation. In the middle 1900s the Southern Pacific placed volcanic cinder material of low density in the embankment to lower the weight that drives compaction of underlying sediments. The UP may have raised it since that observation of high water in about 2005. It is not unlike the track from Suisun to Martinez. To raise either required careful placement of a wide shoulder as the embankment is raised to prevent rotational slides (which are sudden and drastic local depressions in the embankment.) That work would impact a sensitive habitat.

South of Los Angeles both Orange County (OCTA) and North San Diego County (NCTD) are conducting studies of their respective problems, San Clemente and Del Mar. Is there a coalition out there with a sufficiently long-term view to do more than “make do and mend”? You can be sure that we’ll keep a close watch on developments.

Safety, Punctuality, and Long Trains

Changes in railroad operating practices have resulted in longer freight trains. Long freight trains are usually slower moving, and in any event take longer to clear into a siding or enter or leave a yard. This slow movement sucks up capacity, even if it results in fewer trains being run. As far as communities along the line are concerned, the bigger issue is the blocking of grade crossings. A two-mile long train at a constant 40mph takes three minutes to pass a grade crossing, plus the approach time from when the crossing gates are signaled. This is significant in an emergency situation, and causes people to risk racing the train to avoid being delayed. Worse, what happens when a train becomes disabled? There are scores of small towns across America where there are only two, perhaps three crossings of the railroad, usually about a half mile apart or less. But you don’t have to go far afield to find an example of the chaos a train of this magnitude could cause. In the San Fernando Valley in a two-mile stretch are grade crossings at Tampa Avenue, Corbin Ave, Winnetka Ave, Mason Avenue and De Soto Avenue. Imagine three or more of these arteries blocked. Two are important bus routes, De Soto is the site of a Kaiser hospital, the ramifications are significant.

There are apparently no regulations at federal level regarding the length (or tonnage) of individual freight trains. Any attempt at a State regulation will usually be opposed by the railroads and upheld by the commerce clause. Today’s trains, with powerful locomotives at head end, and frequently midway and on the rear, can often drag a derailed car a great distance without the engineer being aware. With a long train, a crew member looking back may not be able to see what is happening at the rear of the train. And on top of all this the railroads keep trying to reduce the crew to a single individual.

It is time for the Congress to hold hearings on this issue.

Van Nuys Station (Cover Story)

I attended the official opening of the Van Nuys station island platform. As you will see from the cover picture the “shelters” are entirely form over function. Believe it or not, they were designed to resemble the radiator grill of a 1965 Chevelle,

WANTED: Photographers for Steel Wheels

If you have a collection of hi-res jpeg photos, especially of passenger trains in California, or enjoy taking them, contact the Editor.

WANTED: Photographers for Steel Wheels

We need you!

pdyson@railpac.org

Don’t forget to check your subscription expiration date on the mailing label and renew your membership if it is due.

Thank you for your continued support for RailPAC and passenger rail.
which was manufactured in the General Motors plant that used to be on the north side of the station. The “shelters” are almost useless in either sun or rain. You can’t stand under them because of the large concrete plinth that supports them. Once again there is typically low regard for the actual user of the service.

Either side of the station is plain track to CP Woodman to the east and CP Raymer (the end of double track) to the west. It’s unfortunate that there is not a crossover at the west end of the station which could provide a pocket track to facilitate the turnback of trains. Currently Metrolink operates random trains to Burbank Airport using time available for crews and trains. RailPAC has written to Metrolink and Metro to request a half hourly service between Union Station (LAUS) and Van Nuys. This may require such a crossover to be built as well as other investments, but it would be a pilot project for the SCORE program which calls for interval service around the system.

Power Points

I hear that a battery locomotive has arrived in Southern California and will be evaluated while performing switching at a freight yard. RailPAC is very supportive of battery technology, not least because so much development work has been done by California based Tesla. But while battery technology is advancing apace the railroad environment, power requirements to move heavy trains up and over our hilly terrain are formidable. In our opinion the next step will be a battery and diesel combination to solve this problem. There’ll be an extensive review of this topic in the Spring Steel Wheels including a look at San Bernardino’s Arrow project, and Vivarail’s repurposing of retired trains with diesel, battery and hydrogen power packs.

Van Nuys shuttle as SCORE Pilot?

RailPAC has written to Stephanie Wiggins, CEO of Metrolink, and Phil Washington, CEO of Metro, to ask for an immediate staff study of the feasibility of half-hourly service between Union Station and Van Nuys, serving Glendale, Burbank, and Burbank Airport. This would act as a pilot for the systemwide SCORE program of regular interval aka clockface service. While there may need to be some changes to signaling and new crossovers at Van Nuys it is worth asking the question. We finally have a double track railroad between Los Angeles Union Station and Van Nuys (a suburb of LA and still within city limits). We should put it to work as soon as possible.

SB 742 Implementation

The San Joaquin Rail Authority has taken initial steps to implement open access to Thruway buses for non-Amtrak ticket holders. The first routes will be between Bakersfield and Goleta via Santa Paula and Oxnard and Bakersfield to Victorville. We’ll be pushing for the network to be expanded at an early date. In addition there is an opportunity for agencies such as Metrolink and Caltrain to sell through tickets (Buena

Park to Palm Springs via Fullerton, Redwood City to Monterey via San Jose). Metrolink already sells through tickets to LAX using the Flyaway bus from Union Station. Let’s fill up more seats!

SMART

I focused on the Sonoma Marin Transit system (SMART) this month because of the important vote coming up in March to extend the sales tax supporting the route. In an extraordinary development a private company has donated more than $500,000 to the campaign against the initiative. In response the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria tribe has chipped in north of $1 million to support the sales tax measure. While we’re glad to see interest in public transportation this is another reflection of the trend to big money politics. I think we would rather see individual voters make up their own minds based on the facts, rather than thirty second commercials.

Las Vegas – What’s Happening?

In spite of a number of attempts to contact Virgin Rail we have been unable to obtain an interview with the project managers, so all we have is the press releases. Through local contacts we hear there is some discussion behind the scenes about the High Desert Corridor link to Palmdale. But as we have pointed out, the legacy line to Los Angeles from Palmdale is hardly conducive to modern, high speed passenger rail service. Just like the California HSR project, at some point soon someone will have to spend serious amounts of money to get through the mountain terrain that separates the major population centers. As a former head of the California Division of Rail commented once, “There’s nothing cheap about this railroad stuff”.

RailPAC Reunion at recently reopened TRAXX, Union Station L-R Susan Jackson, Noel Braymer, Paul Dyson, James Smith, Russ Jackson
Back in August we played a role in defeating Proposition 105, which would have killed all future rail – both light and heavy rail – in Phoenix. The forces of dark money came to town to end the light rail revival that began in San Diego in 1979 – and got their heads handed to them! We basked in the afterglow of that 62% landslide before returning to the key mission of saving Amtrak from itself.

As everyone knows by now, Richard Anderson, Amtrak’s president, wants to put an end to the national network of long-distance trains by emphasizing the Northeast Corridor and other corridor operations of no more than 750 miles. “They are relics of the past,” said Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao about the national network in her testimony before a Senate committee.

They say, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” After our successful meeting in Tucson with the movers and shakers of that city and Pima County, Amtrak came to town to discuss one round trip a day between Los Angeles and Tucson via Phoenix, and three round trips a day between Phoenix and Tucson. They asked the mayor of Tucson to write a letter to Anderson requesting this service. Amtrak had not discussed this with Union Pacific, the Arizona Department of Transportation or the Governor’s Office, nor had they queried UP on the cost of reopening the West Line out of Phoenix. We at least had performed that task and received a figure of $500 million from the railroad to put the line back into service. In return for that letter from the mayor, Amtrak would fund a four- to five-year feasibility study and then ask the states of California and Arizona to pay for this state-supported service. They were unaware of the restriction on non-highway transportation spending in the Arizona Constitution. I’m willing to give people the benefit of the doubt, but I came away suspecting that this was a “jobs for the boys” program to produce a study that would gather dust on a shelf.

We shut down the Western Interstate Trains Coalition after a lack of financial support and the fact that only half the states provided volunteers to keep the effort going. But the volunteers who did participate became stars, gathering support in their states for our grass-roots campaign to keep pressure on Congress to prevent Amtrak from rolling up the national network. We won that battle for now.

Our meetings in Arizona to support Amtrak’s national network had concentrated on local political and financial players – the movers and shakers – of the towns with train stations. As we raced to the finish line, we held two meetings that became town meetings, and that was a change!

Kingman is dependent on the Southwest Chief because it’s the only public transportation to serve the town. The local newspaper and radio station informed residents that we were coming to talk about the possible loss of their train, and we filled the Kingman Town Council chamber for our presentation. In addition to movers and shakers, the room was packed with train riders angry that they might lose their only way into and out of town.

On occasion anecdotal evidence tells the story best, and this was a situation where one young woman summed it up perfectly. “I’m legally blind, so I can’t drive. The Chief is the only way I can travel unless I find someone to drive me all the way to Las Vegas and back to catch a plane.” For those who argue that “Amtrak is just a welfare railroad for people who can’t drive or fly,” take heed.

The town government of Winslow wasn’t sure how to handle this so they passed the ball to the Winslow Chamber of Commerce. They knew what to do! The local newspaper and radio station put out the word, and the chamber’s hall was packed. In addition to movers and shakers, the La Posada Hotel sent its management team, Rep. O’Halleran sent his regional director, and the hall was filled with train riders who were angry that they might lose their only public transportation. As with every meeting, the people who attended executed an action plan to contact their congressional delegation to keep the national network running. It’s meetings like this that make a difference.

One delightful surprise was the mayor of Flagstaff, Coral Evans, who came to Winslow to hear our pitch. She asked us for our logo so she could declare Flagstaff the first “All Aboard Arizona Community” and place our banner at the train station and at both entrances to town on Business Route 40.

We’re heartened that we won this victory for the national network, but it’s only a short-term win in a much longer effort. Stay with us. The fight goes on.
Private Investment in Rail Transportation
Steve Roberts looks at alternatives for paying for passenger rail investments.

Both Texas Central Rwy. and Virgin Las Vegas have indicated that they plan to begin construction in 2020. If so, it means that they must develop their private financing packages in the next few months.

To attract private investment an infrastructure project needs to be completed in a timely manner and generate an acceptable rate of return. That is difficult given the reality of the planning time for complex infrastructure projects and the fact that the private sector cannot monetize the benefits of regional economic development.

The big challenge for transit, regional rail and conventional intercity rail in attracting private sector investment is the fact that they are breakeven at best or generate operating losses that have to be offset with tax funds. Also they operate in a market environment where the customers are very price sensitive – i.e. the cost of gas. Despite the challenges, the private sector can be involved; it just means that investment has to be structured to assure profitability.

First, an overview of funding methods used transportation projects.

State and Federal Grants – Direct grants funded by income, property, sales, fuel or special district taxes.

General Obligation Bonds – State bonds sold to the private sector, but paid using general budget funds and backed by the full credit of the funding government entity (CAHSR Proposition 1A).

TIGER/BUILD/CRISI Type Grants – Grants to partially fund a specific project (usually about 50%) the remainder funded from state or local tax funds or private sector funds or combination of several fund sources.

Federal Government Loans – Loans from the Federal Government (several programs) paid back by local taxes, revenue from the activity constructed or a combination of several revenue streams. Several short-line railroads have utilized these loans. Amtrak has used these funds for locomotives.

Private Activity Bond – A tax exempt municipal type bond, sold on the private market, to fund a revenue generating facility with a public benefit. Bond payment is based on the revenue potential of the facility and is not guaranteed by the state, county or municipality although the county or municipality may have a separate minimum revenue guarantee. These bonds are used for projects with strong market and revenue potential, little or no environmental impacts, have lower construction risks (i.e. no tunnels) and/or utilize existing transportation/utility corridors or right-of-ways. Virgin/Brightline (Miami-Orlando) and Virgin/Las Vegas are utilizing this type of financing. Other opportunities for this type of financing include high-volume route segments with growing traffic where any ticket surcharge to fund the project will be small and spread over a large, growing traffic base.

Constructing key links with speed/capacity improvements that dramatically improve the service level of the network such as New York’s Gateway Tunnel, extending Caltrain to Transbay Terminal and high speed rail would be examples of such projects.

Public-Private Partnership (3P) – A form of governance and procurement where the private sector assumes substantial risk, with equity investment (real or the potential financing of losses) as part of the project. There are four major 3P levels each with an increasing level of risk to the private sector – Design/Build (DB), Design/Finance/Build (DFB), Design/Build/Operate (DBO) or Design/Finance/Build/Operate (DFBO). The goal of private sector risk sharing is to bring efficiencies and project delivery innovations that will substantially improve the cost/benefit ratio of the project. Facebook’s interest in the Dumbarton Bridge corridor is one example. There are several large infrastructure firms involved in this segment of the transportation investment market. Results to date have been mixed.

Private Investment – Often leveraging large public investments, (i.e. airline ticketing facilities and gates) private investors pivot off of the public network with a targeted investment that will generate a positive rate of return. Construction of transportation links in order to enhance the value of developable property (as Virgin is doing) is one example. Currently Texas Central is using this type of financing for planning and property acquisition, but will likely use other forms for its large construction effort.

One key strategy to structure the financial package to access private funding is to separate out segments of the enterprise. Those segments considered “sunk costs” with limited or no depreciation potential (right-of-way, subgrade, etc.) would be funded by the public sector. Long-lived engineering works (tunnels, viaducts, etc.) that can only be depreciated over decades would most likely be funded by a mix of government and private loans. Those investments with lifespans that correspond to normal depreciation rates (10-15 years) ballast, track, equipment, electrification, etc. can be funded by the private loans or equity funding. Separating a project into multiple financial segments and strategies might be a strategy that could be used to rebuild the former Southern Pacific line through Phoenix offering a combined commuter, intercity, short-line freight, inland port and centralized distribution center in a large multi-faceted project.

Because of the huge upfront costs and complexity it is unlikely that a truly 100% privately financed transportation network will arise. However, highway gridlock may result in increased private sector involvement in transportation as profitable niche investments are identified.
Our Sleeping car on 421 had the new LED lighting in it, in its the Sunset Limited, rather than two we have seen in the past. We were booked along the way. There was only one Coach car on the two Texas Eagle through-cars was at 80% of capacity, summer. Our 421 attendant told us the number of passengers from San Antonio to Ft. Worth due to UP incompetence last year. We were lucky, remembering our having to ride a bus for about the same time before arriving back in Ft. Worth. We had to wait for the passage of a very slow moving short freight train that brought in some additional revenue and reduced wasted leftover roasted chicken dinners ($18.50) and sold all of them including to many of the crew. After dinner he offered four list) for $10 each, so passengers would not have to buy from the “Burrito Lady” at the El Paso station. He sold all of them, but it didn’t appear to affect the sales at the El Paso station, the “Burrito Lady” at the El Paso station. On our western train the LSA in the Dining Car came on the PA “At Your Seat” meal choice for Coach passengers is no longer available. The good is the quality of the experience, as we reported to you that the quality of the on board dining experience last summer. You knew I’d get there eventually. I can make a flat statement that the food and the service on board our trains were excellent with no fear of contradiction. We were on board for 8 meals total. You may remember my saying in the past that my favorite is the Angus cheeseburger, and it still is. The flat iron steak was done just as I like it, but with a plastic knife it was more difficult to cut. Last year we had regular steak knives, so did those disappear? The fresh-made breakfast pancakes were superb! What had changed since last summer was the “At Your Seat” meal choice for Coach passengers is no longer available. On our western train the LSA in the Dining Car came on the PA after lunch to offer his five leftover Baked Chilaquiles ($13.50 Seat” meal choice for Coach passengers is no longer available. Now let’s go on board the trains and discuss their food service. You knew I’d get there eventually. I can make a flat statement that the food and the service on board our trains were excellent with no fear of contradiction. We were on board for 8 meals total. You may remember my saying in the past that my favorite is the Angus cheeseburger, and it still is. The flat iron steak was done just as I like it, but with a plastic knife it was more difficult to cut. Last year we had regular steak knives, so did those disappear? The fresh-made breakfast pancakes were superb! What had changed since last summer was the “At Your Seat” meal choice for Coach passengers is no longer available. On our western train the LSA in the Dining Car came on the PA after lunch to offer his five leftover Baked Chilaquiles ($13.50 list) for $10 each, so passengers would not have to buy from the “Burrito Lady” at the El Paso station. He sold all of them, but it didn’t appear to affect the sales at the El Paso station, including to many of the crew. After dinner he offered four leftover roasted chicken dinners ($18.50) and sold all of them at a reduced price presumably to Coach passengers. Was he supposed to do that? We commend that LSA for his ingenuity that brought in some additional revenue and reduced wasted food disposal at the end of the trip! Anyway, it is a pleasure to report to you that the quality of the on board dining experience on the western Amtrak long distance trains remains not only high but is something for Amtrak to advertise and be proud of. Why aren’t they doing that? Yes, I am leading up to contrasting
Amtrak’s “Traditional Dining” with what is going on with Amtrak’s eastern long distance trains and their “Contemporary Dining” debacle.

In December Andrew Selden, who we all have known as the “Dean of Amtrak Critics” for many years, rode the Boston section of the Lake Shore Limited from Massachusetts to Chicago, then transferred to the Empire Builder to return home in Minnesota. In an article titled, “The Emperor’s New Clothes” published by Railway Age, we discovered the truth of what that eastern experience is for first class passengers on those trains. Selden said, “There is absolutely nothing ‘First Class’ in ‘Contemporary Dining.’ Lavishing free food and adult beverages on the expense account swells commuting to New York in First Class on a 90-minute trip on Acela, while trashing the meal service for the highest fare-paying passengers embarked upon days-long trips on the interregional trains, emphasizes just how far out of touch with the actual business of the company the leadership is. They have everything backwards.” Is it designed to drive off first class passengers? That might work. For example, on his trip Mr. Selden and his wife sampled two meals and provided Railway Age with photos of them. Mrs. Selden called her meals, “Frozen TV dinners. Mine was dry and flavorless.” The shrimp, rice and sausage offering had so much pepper it it she couldn’t finish it. It was borderline inedible. Passengers who don’t require room service are required to go to the food service car (not really a dining car anymore, even though they are using the brand new Dining Cars back there) to get their reserved box. The Selden’s LSA told them most passengers “prefer to eat in this car and only a few in their rooms.” Amtrak says they are pursuing “Millennials” with this new service, but the LSA said those people “Don’t ride in Sleepers,” and are therefore not eligible to participate in the “contemporary” dining her car offers. Selden noted, with an accompanying photo, that at 7:15 PM on their Lake Shore Limited they were the only people in the Dining Car at that very important time for dining. If you watch the westbound Southwest Chief arrive at LaPlata, Missouri, on Virtual Railfan video you will see its full Dining Car pass by and it is very busy at about the same time. Head in the sand time at Amtrak. And you are stuck with it for now. “By contrast,” the Seldens report, “dinner the next night on the Empire Builder was delightful, the car heavily used, and we enjoyed a pleasant conversation with the strangers with whom we shared the table. It was a completely different universe from 49/449.”

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