Support the National Network, Stop the Anderson Plan!

THE CHOICE

California with, and without the National network trains.

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Rail Passenger Association of California and Nevada
A statewide membership organization working for the improvement and expansion of passenger rail service.

Organized in 1977 by a group of passenger rail supporters, RailPAC has been working for over 30 years to establish a network of rail services that will provide service to and throughout California and Nevada.

We need your support to improve and expand passenger rail service in the west!

RailPAC is a 501c3 Organization therefore all donations are tax deductible.

Representation and Advocacy
RailPAC presents a strong case to federal, state and local governments for reliable rail services from long-distance trains to commuter operations. Your organization gains strength with a growing membership base and members are invited to review and reflect on proposed changes in budgets, routes and service frequencies.

Cooperative Alliances
RailPAC works closely with other rail organizations and transit advocacy groups.

Volunteer Efforts
Members work with local rail passenger groups including Station Hosts at several Amtrak stations, attend and report on meetings of regional and transit boards and write letters to editors of newspapers. Members also submit personal reports of on-board service levels for distribution in Steel Wheels and the weekly e-newsletter.

FOR MORE INFORMATION about RailPAC and how you can help expand and improve passenger rail, visit our website RailPAC.org or fill out and return the form on the back page of this newsletter.

RailPAC.org
Our website includes a complete listing of our current positions, as well as frequent articles and reports from around the state. Visit RailPAC.org to learn more about these and other regional passenger rail projects we support.

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To receive the latest rail news from around the state:
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RAILPAC’S WORK AT-A-GLANCE
RailPAC is working with Amtrak, Caltrans and all agencies involved in achieving the following goals for expanding and extending safe and reliable rail passenger service. We support adequate funding for these services and vigorously promote them.

High Speed Rail
Build the High Speed Rail system together with electrification for Caltrain and Metrolink.

Coast Corridor
Reduce travel times. Continue to enhance onboard amenities. Restore connections to Long-Distance trains at Los Angeles Union Station. Reestablish the Coast Daylight between Los Angeles and San Francisco. New stations at Glendora, Watsonville, Soledad and King City.

Pacific Surfliner Corridor
Campaign for run through tracks at Los Angeles Union Station to improve punctuality and travel times for Amtrak and Metrolink. Extend service to the Coachella and Imperial valleys.

Sunset Corridor
Introduce daily service and reestablish service to Florida.

San Joaquin Corridor
Increase service to and from Sacramento as well as a new station in Elk Grove. Extend daytime and overnight service to Los Angeles.

Capitol Corridor
Increase frequency to hourly service between Sacramento and Oakland. Increase frequency of service to San Jose. Extend service to Reno and Redding and Salinas.

Las Vegas
Reestablish service between Los Angeles and Las Vegas.
Presidents Commentary

COVER STORY

Save The Southwest Chief

The map on the cover tells the story from the California point of view. If, as I suspect is his aim, Amtrak CEO Anderson is successful in eliminating the national network, then this is what the rail map would look like. Apologies to our Nevada members for the lack of a map of the Silver State, but it would be too depressing, since there would be no lines, only white spaces! I make no apologies to those that say that Anderson would convert some of these routes to corridors, and that they should be shown. That may be Anderson’s pitch, but who believes that, for example, New Mexico, Arizona and California would collectively fund a Los Angeles – Albuquerque train of any description. The States have neither the money nor the desire to replace federally funded service with a new state level program. Surely Anderson understands this. Or has NEC-oriented management team fed him a rosy scenario of the “partnerships” that currently fund the state corridors?

I don’t view the funding mechanism for California’s three corridors as a partnership. As I have written here in the past, Californians pay twice for passenger rail, once through our federal taxes for the Amtrak annual stipend, and again through state taxes to pay Amtrak’s monopoly rates for the State Rail Program. We use Amtrak to provide service because they are the sole inheritors of the trackage rights granted by the 1971 legislation that destroyed 66% of passenger service in the USA and left Amtrak to manage the remainder. Under Amtrak we have seen the residual network diminish further, especially in the west, with the loss of the Desert Wind and the Pioneer. Even if you are cynical about the need for these overnight network trains, they serve the purpose of retaining a toehold of passenger service on some key segments of track. These include San Bernardino to Palm Springs (with potential for service to Phoenix), San Luis Obispo to San Jose, and Sacramento to both Reno and Eugene. Once the last passenger train has run over these routes the owner of the lines, in this case Union Pacific, is under no obligation to maintain them to passenger standards and will no doubt demand enormous sums to restore any type of service, be it excursion, regional corridor or long distance.

In this issue RailPAC member and newspaper columnist Dick Spotswood takes up the issue of Amtrak governance and why it has failed to do more than allow our western trains to deteriorate to the point of near collapse. Bruce Richardson contributes a great example of how local and regional Amtrak management have had great ideas stifled by the “experts” in DC. And Andy Selden adds to the debate with suggestions about how Stations could become assets, rather than the burden management makes them out to be. So while our immediate focus is on the Southwest Chief and our attempt to rescue the service from trumped up track maintenance and safety non-issues, let us remember that we are not satisfied with the status quo. We want better amenities, regional menus, 24-hour food service, and new and refurbished rolling stock. So it’s not just “save the Chief”, it’s “improve the Chief”, double the frequency, add a north-south Wyoming – El Paso connecting train, GROW THE BUSINESS!

Amtrak fleet replacement is a recent topic, and once again indicate Amtrak’s focus is on the eastern states and the state corridors. It will be interesting to see the outcome of these initiatives. Locomotives especially are expensive items. Metrolink’s problematic EMD F125s and the Siemens Chargers each cost about $7.5 million a copy, so at least some of the existing fleet is likely to be rebuilt. As we have shown here before, it is possible to rebuild older locomotives with emissions kits to bring them up to current standards.

Amtrak Considers Replacing Amfleet I Equipment

From Railway Age, with permission

First introduced in 1975, the more than 450 Amfleet coach and cafe cars – recognized by their rounded, tubular stainless steel bodies and aerodynamic fluting – are used primarily on routes east of the Mississippi River such as the Northeast Regional, Carolinian and Illinois Service trains. Photo – history.amtrak.com

Amtrak yesterday issued a request for information (RFI) for coach cars, trainsets and self-propelled units that could replace its current Amfleet I equipment.

The equipment includes single-level passenger cars used primarily on routes east of the Mississippi River, Amtrak officials said in a press release.

Based on a review of what manufacturers have to offer, Amtrak plans to release a request for proposals for specific replacement vehicles in 2019.

“New equipment will provide our customers with a more modern experience, while improving ride quality and reliability,”
Amtrak issued a request for proposals (RFP) on June 1 for the modernization or replacement of aging diesel locomotives used on long-distance and some state-sponsored services. According to the RFP, Amtrak is looking to rebuild at least 50 to 75 of its P40 and P42 Genesis locomotives, built by GE beginning in 1992, with AC traction or replace them with new units.

When originally constructed, the P40 featured a monocoque carbody styled by industrial designer Cesar Vergara that was more aerodynamic and fuel-efficient than the EMD F40 it replaced. It was also 14 inches shorter from rail to roofline, to accommodate tight eastern clearances, than the F40. The four-stroke, turbocharged 7FDL 16 prime mover pushed the P40’s top speed to 103 mph, and generated a maximum of 800 kilowatts of head-end power, enough to power 16 Superliner cars. The Genesis units included a unique hostler stand at the rear, for better control and visibility during backing moves.

As part of the contract Amtrak plans to enter a multi-year technical support, spares and supply agreement with the selected vendor.

The closing date for submission of proposals is August 23.

Other topics

We’re continuing to update our policy documents, including regional plans for both northern and southern California. Contact me if you have any specific thoughts and suggestions.

Our annual Steel Wheels Conference and members meeting is fast approaching. Don’t forget to register for this important event.

May 10, 2019 is the sesquicentennial of the Golden Spike ceremony marking the completion of the transcontinental railroad. RailPAC is working with legislators in Sacramento to have both Senate and Assembly pass resolutions calling for a California Rail Day. We have booked the State Rail Museum for an event Saturday May 11, and we are hoping to organize a reception for legislators Wednesday May 8. The City of Sacramento actually celebrated the opening on May 8, 1869. We’ll be looking for volunteers and sponsors to mark the occasion.

Paul Dyson. pdyson@railpac.org
Splitting Up The Chief Could Cost More Than It Will Save

From our colleagues at the Midwest High Speed Rail Association

Several months ago we wrote about prognostications of a bad future for Amtrak’s long-distance trains. Now there are new signs that some of these fears may be coming true.

Amtrak’s Southwest Chief follows the route of the historic Santa Fe wagon trail through the Raton Pass, near the Colorado-New Mexico Border. The railroad through the pass has been there since the late 19th century, and it was once an important transcontinental link. Because of steep grades and sharp curves, heavy freight trains avoid the Raton Pass, making the Southwest Chief the only regular train over the rails.

Over the past few years, a coalition of state and local officials worked tirelessly to put together the funding necessary for BNSF, the owner of the Raton route, to maintain the tracks for the Chief. Thanks to a combination of two TIGER grants and matching funds from Amtrak, BNSF and local governments, the route has received $46 million of investment in upgraded track and signals.

A third TIGER grant and matching funds would supply an additional $25 million, but a sudden reversal by new Amtrak management, led by CEO Richard Anderson, threatens to derail this long-fought effort. Amtrak is reneging on its agreement to contribute $3 million in matching funds, and is instead proposing to replace train service over the route with a bus. This would effectively split the Southwest Chief into three parts: one train from Los Angeles to Albuquerque, one from Chicago to the Kansas-Colorado border, and bus in between.

Splitting up the Chief could cost more than it would save. It would certainly reduce both ridership and revenue, especially by driving away high-dollar sleeping car passengers. Amtrak’s own numbers indicate that 20% of the train’s riders are going all the way from eastern portion of the route to the western one, or vice-versa. (Our last blog on this topic describes how this one train route serves 528 city pairs, as many as an entire airline network.)

Amtrak management seems to be focusing so much on serving short corridors that they’ve blinded themselves to the bigger picture. They must create new service in addition to the existing national network, not instead of it. Amtrak must strengthen its nationwide web, make it more extensive and robust, not cut holes in it. Removing a portion of the Southwest Chief will not only hurt ridership and revenue on that route, but also on other points in the network it touches.

What’s worse, abandoning this stretch of track would seriously endanger efforts already underway to create new service. One planned service, Colorado’s Front Range, would run through the growing Denver megaregion. Beyond offering a local alternative to congestion on I-25, it would create a new connection in the national network between the Chief and the California Zephyr to the north. This route already has the support of Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming, but it would need to use some of the same tracks the Chief does. Abandoning those tracks could effectively kill this effort.

Splitting the Chief would also reduce the effectiveness of a planned northern extension of Amtrak’s Heartland Flyer, which would create a link from northern Texas (and the Texas Eagle train) through Oklahoma to Kansas and the Southwest Chief.

As we said last time, Amtrak can’t cut its way to success. They need to be creating new opportunities for people to take the train, adding new nodes to the network and strengthening existing ones. They can’t do that at the expense of existing service. Carving up the Southwest Chief could put it into the classic “death spiral” of declining revenue and service until it ceases to exist. We hope that isn’t Amtrak’s intent.

CITIZENS FOR RAIL CALIFORNIA dba RAIL PASSENGER ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA
NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEMBERS MEETING

Location: California State Railroad Museum, Auditorium, 125 I Street, Sacramento, CA 95814
Date: Saturday September 29, 2018
Time: Doors open for conference at 10.00 AM (Formal business meeting scheduled for 3 PM)
Agenda:
To conduct the regular business of the company
To elect the Board of directors.
To receive reports from the President and Secretary/Treasurer
Any other business

Conference Fee: $45
Speakers include David Kutrosky, Capital Corridor JPA, and Dan Leavitt, San Joaquin JPA.
See www.railpac.org for updates to program.
Register at railpac2018.eventbrite.com or mail a check (with coupon below) to RailPAC, c/o Marcus Jung, P.O. Box 22344, San Francisco CA 94122
Name: _______________________________________________ Email: _______________________________
Address ____________________________________________ Phone: _______________________________
City/State/Zip ________________________________________
_______ticket(s) @ $45 (enclose check payable to RailPAC) Sept. 29, 2018 Conference
Amtrak is embarked upon an aggressive plan to “de-staff” the majority of its stations, to “cut costs.” The project downgrades the service support for its largest and most commercially successful group of trains, the long-distance interregional services. Amtrak justifies this by the trend toward selling tickets on the web rather than from agents at stations.

De-staffing smaller stations is penny-wise, but pound-foolish. Agents do far more than sell tickets. Agents consult with customers contemplating the highest revenue trips and vacation packages. They provide checked baggage service and train status information. They are the face of the business in their community. They help passengers who miss a train or a connection. They can tell a passenger where to park a car, where to make a transit connection, and where to buy lunch while waiting for a train. They provide safety and security on platforms. They advise greeters when to expect a delayed arrival. They market Amtrak as a good choice for travel.

Imagine, instead of a sterile waiting area with no human presence, a renovated station in a town like Winona, Minn., or Lawrence, Kan., housing, say, a local travel agency and a lively coffee shop. The owner of the business also is a contract Amtrak agent providing full passenger services. Amtrak signage is prominent. It is an inviting and vibrant part of the local community by day, and if the scheduled Amtrak arrivals occur outside normal business hours, at night as well.

A much better solution exists than all but closing the station. Most stations could be converted into lively, inviting profit centers for Amtrak, by using a common business technique.

Thousands of American businesses, some small, some quite large, employ a technique that leverages their capital and managerial resources to build networks of retail sites, some numbering in the multiple thousands. These networks are far larger than anything the business itself could afford, or manage effectively. The technique is called franchising.

Franchising is used in every imaginable business sector, sometimes for sale of tangible products (e.g., automobiles or ice cream), sometimes for services (e.g., education, fitness or lodging). Some franchises involve conversion of an established business into a unit of a larger franchise network (e.g., real estate or travel agencies), or devolution of a company-owned dealership into the hands of the former manager, now acting as an entrepreneur.

A “franchise” is the license (a lease) of the right to use the brand, business format and operating system owned by the franchisor, in exchange for specified fees and the franchisee’s obligation to follow system standards set by the franchisor. This is what makes all units in a chain look and act more or less the same, but distinctively different from competing chains.

Ownership of the licensed property remains with the franchisor, together with the authority to set brand standards. Ownership of the franchised business resides with the franchisee.

The great strength of franchised business networks is the franchisee’s equity in the business. The franchisee’s capital is at risk, just as the potential rewards of a successful business belong to the franchisee. This forcefully concentrates the owner’s attention on the successful operation of the business. Most franchises involve an owner-operator, in daily contact with customers of the business. Even so successful a franchisor as McDonald’s has found that having too many of its units owned by McDonald’s itself, rather than franchisees, isolates management from the customer, and produces reduced sales and damage to customer goodwill.

Franchising facilitates entry into distant, small or difficult markets that the franchisor might struggle to reach using only its own resources. This is exactly Amtrak’s station challenge. Amtrak’s opportunity is
to convert stations into a network of small individual profit and growth drivers, rather than the obsolete cost centers that Amtrak sees in them. Amtrak likely would retain ownership of the big city stations—Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Chicago, New York—as “company stores” under its direct control.

Amtrak trains stop at 500 or more stations that could be taken over by a local franchisee (in some places, the existing agent) who would be a licensee of Amtrak’s brand and operating systems but would also own the resulting business. The franchisee, as in any other system, would be responsible for investing in a facility, new or old, that meets Amtrak’s standards, and providing station services to customers, using Amtrak’s computer systems, printed materials and operating methods.

Most of Amtrak’s smaller stations, even those on once-a-day long distance routes, will support such a business provided it is part of another local business operated from the same physical facility. Some franchisors license their business as an adjunct to another existing business (e.g., a pizza stand in a convenience store or a college foodcourt, or an intercity bus stop in a hardware store). With an Amtrak station, the building might also house a restaurant, car rental or travel agency, florist, or any of a myriad of local businesses. It may be in many cases that the Amtrak agency is merely the add-on and the other business actually pays the rent. That doesn’t matter.

In some communities, e.g., Oceanside, Calif., or Del Rio, Tex., the franchise might be held by a municipality that operates a station as a transit hub.

What’s in it for Amtrak? Station agents don’t just sell tickets. They provide a wide range of extremely valuable services to customers, which help build repeat business in Amtrak’s most productive business unit. All of this is lost by the false economy of “un-staffing stations,” but would be assured at every franchised station, by contract and through the self-interest of the franchisee.

Franchising is a regulated form of business, but the regulations are well-understood and easy to comply with. They entail only modest costs. Only one “director”-level employee at Amtrak, working with a qualified outside franchise consultant or attorney, would be required to manage a station franchise program.

A station franchising program could be in operation in less than six months, at an initial cost of less than $100,000. It would begin to pay dividends immediately in improved sales, public awareness and customer satisfaction scores. A competent franchising program could have a payback period of less than two years. It would be a strong “win-win” for both Amtrak and its customers, and the communities that Amtrak serves.

Andrew Selden

Andrew C. Selden, President of [URPA](https://www.urpa.org), is a former franchise lawyer and past Chair of the American Bar Association’s section on franchise law, the ABA Forum on Franchising. He has established and supported for clients dozens of franchise networks, small and large. Selden was a long-serving member and past chair of the advisory body to state regulators who write and administer franchise pre-sale disclosure obligations, and has written and lectured extensively on franchising.
I used the occasion of a winter visit to my “snowbird” father in West Palm Beach, Florida (WPB) as an opportunity to preview the new Brightline passenger rail service, then operating between WPB and Fort Lauderdale, but by the time of this publication operating all the way into Miami. Another reason for my interest is that the Brightline equipment in Florida is built here in California, and as of late, may be the prototype for the next generation of single level passenger equipment destined for my home state’s Amtrak California routes.

My father was a good sport about accompanying me on this railfan mission. Having my dad along also allowed me to investigate whether it was “senior” friendly to those who might not be comfortable or facile with the latest in “apps” and touch-screen transactions. Given the demographics along the route, one might expect a high number of senior citizens to prefer, for safety or convenience, trading their cars for this form of public transit.

The Brightline website was easy enough to navigate and I chose a roundtrip pairing that conveniently had a very short layover in Fort Lauderdale. At the time, special promotional fares were being offered, making the deal too good to resist. The “Select Service” (their version of a “business class” seat) was only $5 more each way, and had I realized it included an alcoholic beverage, I might have chosen that. However, I would also be driving my dad’s car to and from the station, so prudence dictated a sober experience.

The new Brightline station in West Palm Beach is a few blocks east of the station used by Amtrak and Tri-Rail. At the time of my visit there was much construction on the surrounding streets, taking a bit of negotiation to reach the parking garage. On the plus side, the construction is in the form of housing and retail that is being built specifically to take advantage of its proximity to the rail link. Parking in the spacious garage was also free during this trial period and still is (as of this writing). The fee they ultimately charge may be an eventual consideration for the riders.

It’s then less than a hundred yards from the parking garage into the open, light filled contemporary station. We opted to purchase our tickets at the station (as many seniors like my dad are skeptical when entering credit card numbers via computer). The kiosk was easy enough for me to use, but I watched my father. He had some trouble at first, however
the Brightline staff, like many service workers in south Florida, were very patient and understanding in helping complete his transaction. This was consistent throughout our experience: The station and on-board staff were extremely courteous, friendly and helpful. At the time of our ride the service was lightly patronized and it will be interesting to see if they can maintain that demeanor when rush hour crowds or after-sporting-event hordes descend upon them!

An escalator took us to the upstairs waiting area which has a centrally located snack bar and gift shop and two lounges: one side for the Select Service (business) and another for the Smart Service (coach). The furnishings looked similar, but the Select side had a bar where I could have enjoyed the complimentary cocktail. The children’s play area, complete with oversized building blocks, was happily enjoyed by the kids awaiting our departure. The snack bar selection and prices were on par with the offerings one would find from vendors in LA Union Station.

Boarding was announced about 5 minutes before departure, at which time the “down” escalator to the platforms is activated by a staff person who is also the “security” guard. The entire on-board crew was stationed at their doors, cheerfully directing passengers to the correct class of service. Seats are assigned in advance, but given the light load, I moved us to the center of the car (facing in the direction of travel) and the crew didn’t seem to mind.

And then we were off! The trip is non-stop to Fort Lauderdale and it wasn’t long before we hit 60MPH (according to my phone app). On the well-maintained FEC roadbed, the ride was smooth and the car interior was quiet enough to hear soft conversation. Knowing that these cars might be heading to California, I was impressed with the upholstery, seat pitch and overall comfort level. The aisles are wide, overhead racks ample, and the large windows create a cheery, spacious interior. The requisite digital signage reported the time and next station stop.

The vestibules, like those on Amtrak’s Cascade trains, make the intersection between cars feel more like a spacious, open lobby. To one side of the vestibule is the restroom, designed for “hands-free” operation. It took a bit of tricky hand-waving to make the doors and toilet operate, but the hands-free restroom provided a comfortable experience.

The train blasted its way through countless grade-crossings, and the horn seemed to blare (albeit muted by the time the noise reached our car) almost nonstop. My GPS registered a highest speed of 81 MPH on the route, and the ride continued to be without excessive sway or vibration. How the train would fair at lower speeds on less well-maintained track (as can be found on California’s coast line) remains unknown.

About 10 minutes after departure, an attendant rolled a snack cart down the aisle, offering a variety of drinks and light snacks. The prices were on par with current Amtrak café selections. Had we been in “select service” I could have chosen an alcoholic beverage. I chatted with the attendant about the problems of inebriated passengers (often following sporting events) as we experience here (on Caltrain, for example, after a Giants baseball game). She said they’d been given training in handling such occurrences, and had strict policies for “cutting people off.”

Upon arrival in Ft. Lauderdale, we were ushered up to a waiting area similar to that in West Palm. Fifteen minutes later, the escalators were reversed and took us back down to the train, which made an on-time arrival back to WPB. I chatted briefly with our engineer before departure. He had formerly worked Amtrak’s Surfliner between LA and San Diego and made the switch to Brightline because he foresaw a diminishing future with Amtrak for an attractive offer in Florida.

Brightline made a very good first impression. In comfort and customer service, they receive high marks. Currently the staff-to-passenger ratio is very high; it will be interesting to see if they can maintain this level when passenger loads increase. It also remains to be seen if patronage increases when the low introductory fares (and free parking) are eventually increased. One thing is certain: The frustrating traffic on parallel Interstate 95 that would motivate rail travel is not likely to diminish any time soon.

My final note is that, although the comfort of the Brightline single-level coaches is high, the current length of their trainsets (and requirement for high level platform access) would need to be overcome if they are to be used in California. It would take a train over double the length I rode to equal the capacity of current 6-car bi-level Surfliners. Combined with trap-door operation for low-level platforms, these encumbrances present a major challenge to augmenting or replacing the California fleet.

Floridians, however, should rejoice. This new service is off to a bold start, and we should keep an eye on their ridership metrics now that the Miami segment is completed.
The new Charger diesel-electric locomotives are being built for transportation agencies across the country for operation along heavily-traveled corridors in Illinois, California, Washington, Michigan, Washington, Maryland, and Florida. These efficient, environmentally responsible and cost-effective locomotives are designed to provide a range of customer-specific technical solutions. The lightweight, high-performance locomotive ensures reliability for the customers, and the passengers will experience a quieter, more efficient and cleaner operation with improved travel times.

usa.siemens.com/mobility
Let us revisit the work of the late, great Doctor Adrian Herzog, (1948 – 2001) mathematician, astrophysicist, and Vice President of Research for RailPAC. Adrian developed the Matrix Theory as it pertains to passenger rail, and demonstrated the absolute necessity of building networks, rather than corridors, to effectively serve the largest number of journeys. In a nutshell, the theory shows that as networks are extended with additional stations, the travel opportunities increase exponentially rather than in linear fashion.

Amtrak CEO Richard Anderson’s policy of fragmenting the National Network of Overnight Sleeper Trains, aka the long-distance routes and partially replacing them with disconnected corridors has the opposite effect. Let’s look at Adrian’s favorite train, the Southwest Chief, between Los Angeles and Chicago.

- As of today, the Chief has 32 stations including the end points. Thus the matrix for a single seat (or sleeper) ride on that train is:
  \[ 32 \times (32 - 1)/2 = 496 \]
- Patrons along the route have 496 options of travel between the different station pairs.
- Now let’s look at the Anderson plan, which will be a train between Chicago and Kansas City, and another train between Los Angeles and Albuquerque.
  - Chicago to Kansas City has 8 stations including end points, so 8 \times (8 - 1)/2 = 28
  - Los Angeles to Albuquerque has 12 stations including end points, so 12 \times (12 - 1) = 66.
  - The TOTAL matrix of the two corridor trains is 94, as opposed to the 496 of the train today.

You could go even further into this. Amtrak says they have more than 500 stations, let’s say 525. We know that Amtrak customers make many different journeys between any pair of these stations.

The Amtrak System Matrix is thus 525 \times (525 - 1)/2 = 137,550. A system like that should be an astonishingly productive transportation asset. Anderson wants nothing to do with it. Eliminating the Network trains in the west will leave a Pacific Northwest regional network, a northern California network and a southern California network, with a few other groups such as Chicago around the country. Each of these corridors or clusters of corridors has its own matrix but will not connect with the others.

- Chicago will retain a substantial network of about 75 stations assuming the Id trains are converted into corridors. 75 \times (75 - 1)/2 = 2775.
- The Surfliners have 30 stations: 30 \times (30 - 1)/2 = 435
- Northern California has 28 stations: 28 \times (28 - 1) = 378
- The Cascades have 17: 17 \times (17 - 1)/2 = 136.
- Let’s assume there is another cluster around New York and the Northeast, say 75 stations: 2775
- And another group or corridor in the southeast of 25 stations: 300.

Our grand total remaining Matrix of Amtrak journey opportunities is the total of each corridor or regional network, 6799. The numbers do not lie. By breaking up the network and destroying the national system Amtrak reduces the number of journey options it offers from 137,550, to 6799.

Now of course we know that not all origin and destination pairs are created equal. But we do know that end point travel is less important on Amtrak, and that it enjoys a large patronage to, from and between small towns all across the country. Even if only one ticket is sold between two particular stations it is the accumulation of this great variety of journeys that gives Amtrak its unique value to our Country. This is the value Anderson and his cohorts fails to recognize, and is destroying.
There's so much to see Car Free in Santa Barbara!

SantaBarbaraCarFree.org  @SBCarFree

Santa Barbara Car Free is a cooperative project founded and led by Santa Barbara County Air Pollution Control District for cleaner air and a healthier planet. See OurAir.org.
What a difference a day makes! The chairmen of the House and Senate transportation committees of the Arizona Legislature were carefully shepherd ing a bill that would have permitted individual counties to ask their voters to approve sales tax hikes to go to transportation items that could include rail. Then the state’s teachers went on strike.

“Red for Ed” said the signs. “Give us a raise,” shouted the teachers. They demonstrated day after day at the legislature until the legislators and the governor bowed before the onslaught. The teachers would get their raises – and all other business before the legislature would turn to dust. A golden opportunity was lost.

Visiting individual legislators to gauge their interest in rail was a top priority once the session ended. One state representative drives a locomotive for BNSF when he isn’t in the legislature, and he spent 90 minutes educating me on the details of how Arizona handles esoteric items like the financing of grade crossings, flyovers and highway overpasses. I walked out of that meeting a lot wiser – and a bit daunted.

Phoenix had made a bid for Amazon’s second headquarters unit but flunked the first question: “Do you have commuter rail or intercity rail? How will your employees get around?” After seeing the wrong answer to Question #1, the application took up residence in the circular file. Business leaders and politicos understand that Arizona offers a better business climate than many other states, but the lack of a robust rail component to the transportation mix is hurting the state in general and Phoenix in particular.

It was the mayor of Maricopa who summed it up most succinctly. “Phoenix and Tucson are growing closer together as the empty spaces between them fill up. In time we’re going to look like Dallas/Fort Worth.”

In Florida, the Brightline project has become a major success. The initial link from Fort Lauderdale to West Palm Beach is carrying three times its project ridership since it opened in January. The link into Miami opened in May, and now all their trains run full. They are preparing to build to Orlando and have announced a future Orlando-Tampa link.

Upon hearing that Fortress Capital was looking for other corridors in which to clone the Brightline concept, I forwarded them the statistics of our corridor by sending them the $6 million ADOT high speed rail study that had been financed by the FRA. I finally heard from Brightline, and they indicated an interest in our Phoenix-Tucson corridor following the overwhelming success of their Florida project. In fact, they announced they would like to come to Phoenix and meet with us.

This prompted a mad dash to meet people and gauge their interest in a private sector solution to passenger rail. In my travels I visited 27 governmental and private entities and talked with 46 people. The mayor of Coolidge took me out of his office, pointed to the adjacent Union Pacific tracks, and said, “Here is where we’re going to put the Sunline station.” The city manager of Eloy practically hugged me. The county administrator of Pinal County put on the fatted calf. Everywhere I went, there was nothing but enthusiasm for a private sector solution that would end 30 years of government gridlock – especially because none of these people would have to pay for building it. The industrial property developers along the line were especially interested and wanted stations right next to their properties. I found no one who disliked the idea.

I received the corporate line from Union Pacific, but I had expected no less. I now know the size of the required liability insurance policy and the details of track separation for passenger trains. I even learned about the gasoline pipeline buried under the tracks at Phoenix Union Station and why we’ll need a different approach to downtown. I never ceased to be educated in this endeavor.

One legislator warned me that the railroad would want to see a checkbook with an integer followed by an infinite number of zeros because it would want the entity using its line to pay for the thirty-year plan that the vigilantes of Wall Street wouldn’t permit it to pay for. As a result, we would need a skilled negotiator or the railroad would skin us out of our eye teeth. As they say in New Jersey where I grew up, “Nothing personal, just business.”

It’s the real estate developers who will make or break this effort. Mixing rail and real estate is nothing new. Abe Lincoln gave away vast tracts of the west so that the railroads could sell the land to raise the capital necessary to build their transcontinental lines. Every 32 miles the steam locomotive had to stop to take on water, and tank towns grew around these locations. Tucson and Phoenix started as tank towns over a century ago, and so did many of the towns between them. What was old is new again.

Next quarter we’re hoping to get the Union Pacific, Fortress Capital and regional real estate developers to shake hands and start negotiating.
Almost 20 years ago, there was a good solution which Amtrak experimented with to make its dining cars on long distance trains perform better financially: It was the 24-hour dining car on the Sunset Limited. This was accompanied by an onboard promotion of “When You’re Hungry, You’re Hungry” and promotional materials were placed in every coach seatback and sleeping car accommodation.

It was a financially successful experiment that ended because the management of the Sunset went from one business group to another, and the succeeding business group management invoked the “not invented here” reason for ending it.

The basis for the experiment was sound: instead of cutting a dining car’s offerings as a way to prosperity, the opposite was done, expanding to prosperity and making full use of an expensive asset.

When the Superliner fleet was built, the single most expensive piece of rolling stock was the 72 seat dining car. Ironically, the dining cars on all Amtrak long distance trains are the least used piece of rolling stock, only being open to passengers for at most 11.5 hours out of a 24 hour day if the train is operating over a transcontinental route. The 24-hour dining car reversed that mistake.

The 24-hour dining car recognizes another important factor of train travel; the trip to and from the vacation destination doesn’t have to be the unpleasant grind found in today’s air travel.

Back in 1952, Cunard Line, the premier transatlantic cruise line, recognized the coming competition from fast air travel (The initial planning for what would be the Boeing 707 launched in 1957 was already underway.), created an advertising campaign with the catch-line of “Getting there is half the fun!” Today, that same slogan should apply more and more to passenger train travel as the comfortable alternative to air travel.

When sleeping car passengers are on vacation, they may wish to break their routine of an early breakfast then off to work, enjoying a leisurely breakfast mid- or late morning. When a dining car routinely closes early as it was customary to close the Sunset’s breakfast service at 9 a.m., that eliminated a lot of choices for passengers trying to enjoy a less-hurried travel experience.

At the time, the Sunset was run by the Gulf Coast Business Group, based in New Orleans. The general manager of the Gulf Coast Business Group had a broad understanding of long distance trains from many perspectives, including marketing, operations, maintenance, and inspiring employees. It was one of the most well-run business groups, and was working miracles. The group’s trains originally considered “problem children” by many, and were the Sunset Limited, Crescent, and City of New Orleans.

My company was a contractor to the business group, and we provided services on a number of issues, including onboard services. Along with two of Amtrak’s best onboard services managers, one a long-time chef before rising in the ranks, we were tasked with creating a 24-hour dining car experiment for the Sunset, at the time, operating between Los Angeles and Orlando, Florida. The Los Angeles-based dining car and other onboard services crews worked a long trip – three nights from Los Angeles Union Station to Orlando, one night’s rest, then three nights back to Los Angeles.

About the same time, a professional survey of Sunset Limited passengers had been completed. The Sunset’s passengers consisted of American Express Gold Card members (at the time, the premium AmEx card), a lot of college graduates including some Ph.Ds, and passengers with higher-end household incomes. The survey showed the passengers were there for a number of reasons, from VFRs (visiting friends and relatives), those using it for basic transportation, those on vacations, and the occasional business traveler. The bedrooms in the sleeping cars always sold out first, along with the family bedroom and the accessible bedroom. The roomettes were well-patronized, too, as were the coaches.

In FY 1999, much more of the Superliner fleet was in use than today, and western transcontinental train consists were long. The Sunset always had a baggage car, crew car, at least two sleepers, diner, lounge, four coaches, and between San Antonio and Los Angeles the through coach and sleeping car from the Texas Eagle. With a good load factor, it wasn’t unusual to have more than 350 passengers on the Sunset at any given time.

Several experimental runs were completed, and were successful. The financial results of the test runs proved several things, such as labor costs were not too high. It took 11 dining car employees to make the tests work; two more than the normal crew size. Because of convenience, passengers made greater use of the dining car than before; they ate when they were hungry, not when they were directed to be hungry. Longer, more leisurely meals meant the coach passengers who ate in the dining car spent more money. It was also important that the menu prices were considerably lower than those found today. The prices were comparable to a casual restaurant of the time, and a family traveling together could afford to eat in the dining car without expending most of their vacation food budget.

The booming business in the lounge car, which maintained normal hours from early morning to late evening, did not suffer with the 24-hour dining car.

The passengers liked it because no dining car reservations were required and had no set hours. The crews liked it because the dining car “never topped out” with every seat at every table taken, trying to rush patrons through a meal so the next seating could be accommodated. An unexpected side benefit for the crew members was tips were higher, reflecting patrons who were happier. It was good for Amtrak because food and beverage revenues were higher, and any incremental costs associated with the two overnight employees were more than compensated for by the increased sales revenues. Another benefit for sleeping car passengers was 24-hour room service if they desired a snack, alcoholic beverage, or late meal in their accommodation. Providing this service also increased tip amounts for sleeping car attendants serving passengers in their accommodations.
The lead service attendant, after seating passengers at their choice of tables, offered a pre-dinner cocktail, which substantially increased alcohol revenues. Wine to enjoy with the midday or evening meal was also sold to sleeping car passengers, providing an additional revenue source. At the end of the evening, many passengers came back to the diner for the same reason they go to their kitchen at home before bed, to have a dish of ice cream or piece of pie.

Preparing for the experimental runs was done with a clean slate; we were charged with creating new concepts and the only restriction we had was the amount of food storage space available in the diner. The unions were consulted in advance, and gave permission for two employees to work overnight and rest during the day. The overnight shift consisted of a lead service attendant handling all functions upstairs, and a chef in the kitchen.

A complete new set of menus was created, all based on existing foods available through regular vendors. The fun part was taking basic ingredients and seeing how many ways the same item could be used in multiple menus during the day. Breakfast bacon also helped sell a bacon cheeseburger for the daytime menu, and the bacon helped create the single most popular item for the overnight menu, a bacon, fried egg, and cheese sandwich. This was before Amtrak switched to a heat-and-serve menu, and most items in the dining car were prepared fresh.

The menus were a breakfast menu, a late morning/lunch brunch menu, an afternoon daytime menu, a dinner menu, and a late night menu.

Sleeping car passengers felt more pampered, and received more value for their accommodation fares. Coach passengers also dropped into the diner during the overnight hours and spent money if they were restless in their coach seats. After the lounge car closed at the traditional time, many patrons not yet ready to retire for the evening would come into the 24-hour dining car and continue to purchase an evening drink, often accompanied by a purchased food choice.

Passengers entraining or detraining at major stations overnight, such as San Antonio, and, at the time, Houston, often patronized the diner for something to eat before detraining, or as a place to settle down a bit and enjoy a snack if they had just boarded. Either way, it was a winner for the dining car.

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Amtrak often points a finger at dining car labor costs, and wants to find ways to cut labor expenses. After running the numbers on these 24-hour experiments, and, then taking annual dining car numbers for the Sunset, Crescent, and City of New Orleans and crunching them to see what it would take to make the dining cars at least break even, the end result was – with some tweaking here and there – the dining cars could become a profit center instead of purely a cost center. In short, labor was not the problem. Lack of focus on best use of dining cars and improving them was the problem.

Superliner dining cars were designed to be staffed by 11 employees, but staffs had been trimmed to nine by FY 1999. For the 24-hour dining car, 11 employees were used: two chefs, one night, one day; two LSAs, one night, one day; three food specialists in the kitchen, including the employee washing the dishes (this was before throw-away plates and cutlery); and four servers waiting on tables.

Much is made by today’s Amtrak about “contemporary dining” and eliminating “communal dining” for sleeping car passengers. The menus for the 24-hour dining car were designed to appeal across all segments of passengers, from families traveling with small children, to teenagers and young adults seeking non-complicated meals (burger, chips, and a drink), to retirees looking for a full meal, from pre-dinner drink to an entree with sides, and dessert.

With the 24-hour dining car never being completely full at any one time, patrons could sit together, or singles or couples traveling could choose to sit alone. There was no forced communal seating.

Without getting into specific numbers here, the financial results of the experimental runs were good. Revenues were up and more than covered incremental expenses related to the test runs as well as contributed overall to the dining car’s financial well-being. As stated above, the employees acknowledged many benefits, from easier work loads while maintaining the same number of hours being compensated for, less stress because of no peak times, and tips were higher.

The day chef liked it because at the end of the day, instead of having to prepare to close the kitchen before heading to the crew car, the kitchen was handed over to the night chef, who kept things going. Towards the early morning hours, the night chef, while meeting the needs of the overnight passengers, also was able to begin the breakfast prep work, allowing the day chef some extra sleep before returning to the kitchen. The night chef continued to work during the early breakfast hours, taking some of the load off of the day chef.

The same was true for the night LSA and the day LSA. The day LSA handed off upstairs to the night LSA at the normal time the diner would close under the old rules, and the night LSA, in the early morning hours, would do the upstairs breakfast prep chores. When the day crew arrived, much of their early morning work was already completed. Also, the upstairs routine of closing and opening was eliminated, saving more time. The night LSA helped through the early breakfast service, providing better patron service with the additional LSA, such as offering revenue-generating morning Bloody Mary or Mimosa eye-openers.

The bottom line was, there was no downside to the 24-hour dining car. It was a financial improvement from a revenue standpoint, it made the Sunset a better travel experience for passengers, it was superior utilization of an under-used asset (the dining car itself), and, most importantly, it met a need of passengers. Good transportation is much more than just ferrying passengers from Point A to Point B. Because, as Cunard famously said, “Getting there is half the fun!”

J. Bruce Richardson is currently vice president of Corridor Capital, a Chicago-based passenger rail developer and rolling stock leasing and finance company. In the late 1990s, Mr. Richardson’s prior company operated the Sunset Limited and City of New Orleans Promotional Office under contract to Amtrak’s Gulf Coast Business Group.
A 21st Century Model For American Passenger Rail

By: Dick Spotswood.

THE DILEMMA:

It’s now obvious that Amtrak, the National Railroad Passenger Corporation, and its new management under former Delta Airlines CEO Richard Anderson, regards its principal responsibility as making the Northeast Corridor America’s first true high-speed rail route.

That’s a worthy goal and no easy task. Running from Boston south through seven states and the District of Columbia, the Northeast Corridor is the central transportation axis for southern New England and the Middle Atlantic states.

The dilemma is that Amtrak’s mandate is not limited to the northeastern states. Amtrak’s official name is the NATIONAL Railroad Passenger Corporation. Some forget that the rail passenger corporation’s mandate has always been to provide a truly national rail system. Unfortunately, it’s a role that Anderson, the current Amtrak board and much of its senior staff gives mere lip service.

It’s time for America to have two intercity rail passenger operators: The current Amtrak in the eight-state/District of Columbia Northeast Corridor and a brand-new passenger corporation providing a high level of services for the remaining forty-two states.

Amtrak’s current priority, whether it is staff time, innovation, planning or allocation of fiscal resources, is the right-of-way between Boston and Washington. The reality is that the Northeast Corridor is perceived by the corporation as the prime reason for its existence. The national system serves as little more than a useful political device when it comes time for the public passenger carrier to seek federal subsidies.

When times are fiscally tough, those trains provide Amtrak’s current management with a convenient scapegoat: blame deficits on long-distance trains. While based on erroneous data, it’s a task facilitated by Amtrak’s dysfunctional opaque accounting system and a political agenda that places the Northeast Corridor as priority one. A correct accounting that includes capital and fairly distributes overhead (management) costs, will demonstrate the Northeast Corridor isn’t a money-maker as Amtrak claims and requires substantial federal dollars. Of course that deals with the inconvenient fact that some of those states commuter lines use the Northeast Corridor far more frequently does Amtrak’s intercity trains.

Amtrak’s focus is on this 455-mile stretch of Middle Atlantic-Southern New England mainline trackage. That leaves than the remaining national system’s approximately twenty-one thousand route miles across the American West, Midwest and The South as an unwanted stepchild. So much for so-called “fly-over country.” Some of Amtrak’s limited focus is due to practical concerns; but a big part is an East Coast centric corporate cultural that overwhelms both staff and board. The final element is political

From an Amtrak management and board point of view it concentrating on the Northeast Corridor and especially their Acela high-speed train service provides a manageable project within the professional capabilities of their current staff. Acela has had its problems, not a wholly unexpected development given the pathetic lack of American-based high-speed rail expertise.

It’s even consistent with the innovative plan proposed seven years ago by House Transportation Committee chair John Mica (R-Florida) and Rail Subcommittee chair Bill Shuster, R-Pennsylvania, to privatize development and operation of the Northeast Corridor. Whether operated, as now, as a quasi-public agency or, as Congressmembers Mica and Shuster proposed as a private railroad, the Northeast Corridor has the volume of passenger traffic and the potential for increased freight services that should make it a viable stand-alone railroad under either scenario ... if properly managed.

CULTURE:

The corporate cultural aspect of the dilemma is harder to quantify, but very real. The men and women who manage Amtrak are based in Washington, D.C. Most have spent the bulk of their professional lives in those very same Middle Atlantic States. When they, their friends and family think of rail, they naturally focus on what they personally are familiar with.

They ride Northeast Corridor trains with some frequency. When they look out the windows of their Washington Union Station-based national Amtrak headquarters, they see the Northeast Corridor fleet, along with excellent Maryland and Virginia commuter operations. The few long distance trains to Florida, the Midwest and the South appear as oddities with weak constituencies. They are easy to ignore and can even be entirely written off with little political or bureaucratic risk ... so far.

It’s so easy for most of us residing in the bulk of the continental United States to forget but Northeasters suffer from a provincialism that regards much of America, even California, Chicago or Dallas, as a backwater. They vaguely understand that New Orleans, San Francisco, Chicago and for the well-traveled, perhaps Seattle or Denver, do exist. More often these far-off exotic locales are out-of-sight and out of mind. They consider us “the Coast,” “The Far West” or “the planes.” These are defined anywhere west of Buffalo or south of Richmond. We live in cities and town where Northeasterners go on vacation but certainly not where they perceive many Americans actually live.

The very notion that real live people live in small towns like Whitefish Montana, Ottumwa Iowa, Lamy, New Mexico, Meridian Mississippi or even Santa Barbara, are incomprehensible to the good folks of all socioeconomic classes who live and work in or between Washington, Manhattan or Boston.
As long as that East Coast culture represents the world view of Amtrak managers, the National Railroad Passenger Corporation or its privatized successor will be “national” in name only.

**POLITICS:**

The politics of all of this is understandable. In the eight Northeast Corridor states Amtrak and commuter rail is a big deal. Much of the Middle Atlantic States voting public utilizes this rail service and makes it known to their elected officials and the press that they consider passenger rail a priority. Just like their constituents, their elected officials personally use the system and “get it.”

The lamentable but inevitable secondary result is that federal support for rail passenger service tends to be aimed only at those services that Eastern Congressmembers and their constituents personally experience. Ditto for the good folks at NARP.

Unfortunately, the unintended result is that the national long-distance system and those corridors outside of the Northeast are ignored or wrongly dismissed as underutilized anachronisms.

That's certainly the positions of Amtrak’s new senior management.

The negative effects of this Southern New England-Middle Atlantic orientation is visible on every Amtrak long distance train resulting in an inconsistent (at best) on-board passenger service.

Old equipment poorly maintained all staffed by a mixed bag of employees is the norm. While some Amtrak’s employees are highly dedicated and professional, too many – especially Amtrak’s new management led by former Delta CEO Richard Anderson - emulate the worst traits practiced by indifferent private passengers railroads or government bureaucrats, a scenario directly stemming from a management preoccupied with the Northeast Corridor.

To any impartial follower of the national rail passenger scene, it’s clear that unless a prompt order is made for new long-distance passengers cars, the national service will wither away within a decade. That’s how long the present roster of coaches, sleeping cars and diners have left before being hauled off to the scrap heap. Given the huge lead time in ordering any new equipment, the current delay by Amtrak management to address this critical need is appalling.

Likewise, senior Amtrak management doesn’t even possess the basic budgetary tools necessary to evaluate the costs and expenses of long distance services. Their current muddled accounting system provides none of the methodologies widely available to regional transit systems, not to mention airlines, to analyze and accurately inform management of the incremental costs of each of segment of their services.

Wildly inaccurate information is disseminated that too often appears to be grossly biased against any passenger services not based in the Northeast and likewise biased in favor of Northeast Corridor trains.

As AMTRAK critic Andrew Seldon has long pointed out, accounting gimmicks were designed to minimize the costs and maximize the revenue generated in the Northeast Corridor, preordaining that one will always be perceived as a “winner” and the other a fiscal “looser.”

“Lying with numbers” is an old trick in the transit business. It’s the use of seemingly unbiased figures to justify actions that coincide with the agenda preset by staff and well-positioned board members.

While the Northeast Corridor address a crucial if limited segment America’s mobility needs, current Amtrak management tends to ignore other corridors. The mere fact that it is “understood” at Amtrak headquarters that the Northeast Corridor’s infrastructure requirements and operations will be financed by the national system, while California, Illinois, North Carolina, Maine or the Pacific Northwest need to be “partnered” with local state funding sources, is a classic example of the geographical bias inherent the current set up.

The causes of this failure are multiple and bipartisan, but its undeniable that zero progress has been made.

**SOLUTION: TWO SEPARATE RAIL PASSENGER COMPANIES:**

Just continuing the status quo is not only unfair to the other forty-two states it puts untenable pressure on Amtrak’s
current staff and board. It’s also a guarantee that American passenger rail will never be a competitive travel option as it is in so much of the economically advanced world. They are now being asked to serve two masters: the Northeast Corridor, and a national system of long-distance trains and “emerging” corridors. It’s too much to ask, and in the long run unsustainable.

It’s time to dissolve Amtrak. It's very name “Amtrak” has developed in the public such a negative, bureaucratic connotation that it should become the latest “fallen flag.” Why else does Amtrak in the East focus on the weird word “Acela” to describe their premier service.

In its place, two alternative models are suggested.

One involves transforming the present National Railroad Passenger Corporation into a new, slimmed down entity. Either remaining in the public sector which much state involvement or as a taxpayer assisted but private enterprise run corporation, this new NORTHEAST RAIL would be allocated the sole responsibility of perfecting a southern New England -Middle Atlantic passenger service stretching from Boston south to Washington or perhaps even to Richmond, Virginia. If the Northeast Corridor is privatized, there is little doubt that the needed management staff will be lean.

Note that NORTHEAST RAIL will assume all of Amtrak's rights and obligations in the current Northeast Corridor. The current Amtrak staff so oriented to the Northeast Corridor -- though significantly “right-sized” at the headquarters level - would form the core of Northeast Rail’s management team.

Simultaneously, a new rail passenger corporation needs to be established. For now, let’s call it AMERICAN RAIL. It too will assume all of Amtrak’s rights and obligations that exist outside the Northeast Corridor.

Its purpose will be to assume responsibly for all aspects of a new independent passenger railroad. That entity will operate and secure federal financing for all long-distance and corridor services in America west and south of the Appalachians. It should combine aspects of public funding with the actual service perhaps operated by private operators on a line-by-line basis.

It will better for all concerned if NORTHEAST RAIL concentrates on what it knows best - the Northeast Corridor. At the same time, much of America, particularly at a time when the understanding of the travel and environmental importance of AMERICAN RAIL, a truly national rail network, could benefit from an organization focused on its own needs and priorities.

The name AMERICAN RAIL signifies a fresh start and new direction. It should have its headquarters anywhere but Washington. Chicago, the traditional hub for western and mid-American rail passenger services, would be a fine location as would St. Louis or even New Orleans. With its own separate board of directors, new management and working with new private sector operators, AMERICAN RAIL would not compete with NORTHEAST RAIL but serve as its national connection. It will be the conduit for operation of all current state-supported services outside the Northeast Corridor.

With innovation the watchword, AMERICAN RAIL should lead to way to new routes and more frequencies all in new passenger cars and locomotives operated by a freshly recruited and trained staff and management equipped with a private sector-style customer-first approach. They be more like the customer-friendly cruise ship industry that the nickel-and-dime the passengers airline cartel. Is there risk of failure? Yes, but right now the risk of the ultimate demise of Amtrak’s long-distance service seems assured.

THE DIVISION

The new railroad’s mission will be the operation of all American intercity passenger trains outside the Northeast Corridor.

Certain services ancillary to NORTHEAST RAIL’S heartland, such as the New York to Buffalo Empire Service, the Down Easterner Route from Boston to Portland, Maine and the once-a day service extending east from Richmond to Newport News would be subject to amiable negotiations. If NORTHEAST RAIL considers those lines essential part of their bailiwick … and the states involved concur … they should continue to operate them. This plan envisions a non-hostile division resulting in two new, independent but cooperating entities.

The private sector components of both plans is an acknowledgment of the new leaner 21st Century structure of government and the ruinous divide that in the past few years has seen with passenger railroad identified with the Democrats and vilified by many Republicans. A serious effort needs to be taken to depoliticize the topic of passenger rail.

Creating allies in the private sector without alienating labor is a difficult but essential component of this strategy.

This approach will result in two new entities that should create their own new corporate cultures.

While some may consider that scenario optimistic, there is zero doubt that if Amtrak’s status quo is maintained no progress will ever come to pass.

The most difficult aspect will be the division of essential federal operating and capital subsidies between the two new companies. There is no doubt that even if there is significant private sector involvement, federal dollars will remain an essential part of the puzzle, just as it has decades when it
comes to air, highway and barge modes of passenger and freight mobility.

Congress is entitled to a voice even with much private sector participation. Yet, there is no valid reason that rational minds can’t prevail resulting in mediated solution acceptable to Congress and the Administration without raising regional passions.

Greater involvement by the individual states could assist in all of the above described goals. One dares to think that federal funds might even be allocated on a per-capital basis, rather than the traditional allocations which relied more on history than rationality.

**MANY BENEFITS, FEW NEGATIVES:**

This concept is a win-win for all except some current management employees at Amtrak’s Washington headquarters who will find themselves redundant.

Rail labor will benefit. Not only will there be no layoffs of operating personnel, there is a distinct prospect of additional employment associated with more routes and greater frequency. Certainly the manufacturing sector will benefit from equipment purchases to replace worn out passenger cars and locomotive.

Small town America will benefit. Not just from additional routes and frequencies, but from American Rail, a new rail passenger company focused on their long-neglected needs. Likewise, larger Midwestern, Southern and Western states will be rewarded from attention to their emerging corridors linking major and medium sized cities.

Northeast Corridor states win from Northeast Rail, an operation undistracted by what’s proved to be an incompatible long-distance system.

The bulk of America benefits from a new system focused on the needs of Western, Mid-western and Southern states needs and desires with new management open to innovative public-private partnerships.

**MOVING FORWARD - NEXT STEP:**

It’s my suggestion that the Rail Passengers Association (RailPAC) of California and Nevada members contemplate this plan aided by the preparation of professional-quality research reports. The end result would be consideration of adopting the notion of dissolving Amtrak and replacing it with the two new entities, NORTHEAST RAIL and AMERICAN RAIL as RailPAC’s official position.

We would then urge other rail advocacy groups to join with us. Sad to say, it’s doubtful that NARP, almost as East Coast centric as the current Amtrak leadership, would be supportive. NARP’s history, understandably, has been to defend and justify Amtrak management. The time for that self-defeating approach has clearly ended.

An essential early step is to secure bipartisan sponsors in both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives to serve as our proponents. It’s naïve to think that Amtrak’s current board and senior management will not oppose this move. Substantial bipartisan Congressional and Administration support is essential if this proposal is to be taken seriously. Just getting the debate off the ground is not an easy task. We can’t do it with just the old friends of passenger rail. Simultaneously, we need to expand by adding others, e.g., Republicans and the business community, who have in recent years opposed or indifferent to passenger rail, but were supportive in the past.

**WHAT’S TO LOSE?**

At the very least, debating this proposal will cause many in the rail community to think about Amtrak’s current dysfunctional structure and understand its long-term implications which include the ultimate demise of all long-distance rail. A vigorous public conversation will have the salutatory side effect that Amtrak management will likely never again take the West, Midwest and the South for granted as they have done so often in the last few decades.

At best, such a bold discussion will spark others in the rail passenger community to rethink old approaches and faulty assumptions. Ideally this will all lead to a more sustainable vision of a vibrant twenty-first century truly national rail passenger system.

Dick Spotswood
Mill Valley, California
The RailPAC Mission: Passenger Rail advocacy, Publications...both print and electronic, Representation at regional meetings, and Rail education.

Join us! More memberships increase our strength in presenting the case for rail to policymakers at all levels!

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- Weekly eNewsletter and periodic alerts via email
- Eligibility to attend our annual Steel Wheels conference and regional meetings

MAIL TO: RAILPAC c/o Marcus Jung
P.O. Box 22344, San Francisco, CA 94122

DUES LEVEL

☐ Regular ($35-79)
☐ Student/Senior/Fixed Income ($25-34)
☐ Sponsor ($80-199)
☐ Patron ($200-499)
☐ Organization ($500 and above)

MEMBER INFORMATION

Name: ____________________________
Address: ____________________________________________________________
City: ___________________ State: ___ Zip: ________
Phone: ___________________ Email: ________________________

Members: Please notify the RailPAC Office if and when there is a change of address. RailPAC is not responsible for re-delivery if mailed to an outdated address.