IN THIS ISSUE:
FOCUS on the California Coast
  Steve Roberts says
  “Let’s make a deal”
  Paul Dyson asks,
  “Where did the freight go?”

also:
The Station Host Program
Russ Jackson
Reports from Texas
Steve Roberts
responds to Fritz Plous
Arizona Report
Alek Friedman rides the Starlight
Advocates in Action
Railroaders at Work

Chris Mohs – Surfliner at Faria Beach

Charles Freericks - San Ardo Oil Train at Burbank
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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!

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.

Social Media
To receive the latest rail news from around the state:
• Follow us on Twitter: www.twitter.com/RailPAC
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Your Membership includes...
• STEEL WHEELS: Passenger Rail in California and the West
• Weekly newsletter and periodic email alerts
• Eligibility to attend our annual and regional meetings

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 Gilroy, 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.

Capital 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.

RailPAC is a 501c3 Organization therefore all donations are tax deductible.
President’s Commentary

Some Thoughts for Governor Newsom

The problem with the print medium is that what I write today could be out of date by the time you get to read it. As of time of writing Governor Gavin Newsom has yet to announce any policy changes regarding the State’s transportation systems in general, or rail in particular. Silence sends a loud message, and the discourse about education and homelessness is indicative of his priorities. I cannot disagree with either of those. Having attended a school during the equivalent of first through sixth grades with classes of 40 to 47 children with a lone teacher I would be the first to support reduction in class sizes. I feel as strongly about homelessness.

But regardless of his priorities, the Governor should at least announce what his vision is for mobility for Californians. The elephant in the room is the High-Speed Rail project, about which he has made conflicting statements before the election. Investments are being made in rail infrastructure which will not provide any dividend in improved transportation for at least a decade, probably longer. It’s not just a question that additional funds may not be available. More to the point, the California High Speed Rail Authority has been hopelessly inefficient at spending the money that they have. At the other end of the spectrum some relatively small sums are being spent on doubling track, and on grade separation projects, which, when completed, immediately pay off in improved reliability, added capacity, and safety.

The unfortunate reality of California railroading is topographical. Our trunk routes were laid out from about 1870 to 1905. The imperatives of the time were low cost construction, and get something, anything built to lay claim to the territory. Railroads are natural monopolies and you want to reach a city “firstest with the moistest” to keep your competitors out. We are now paying the price for cheap construction. Take the former Santa Fe line between Los Angeles and San Diego, which just happens to link the two largest cities in California, also the second and seventh largest in the USA. Between San Juan Capistrano and San Onofre we have a delightfully scenic piece of single track railroad which would not be out of place as part of the Festiniog Railway in North Wales. Further south the line heads inland towards Miramar up and over the mini alps and down into San Diego, more like the Cumbres and Toltec than a modern people moving pipeline.

Unfortunately, the bottlenecks between Los Angeles and San Diego are replicated by similar examples between the Bay Area and the Central Valley, notably Altamont Pass, between Los Angeles and the Antelope Valley at Soledad Canyon, and the granddaddy of them all, Tehachapi. Without significant investments in tunneling to reduce the journey time to competitive levels our passenger services will remain boutique operations, with thousands, rather than tens or hundreds of thousands, of daily patrons.

So, Governor Newsom, if you are in a dilemma about the State Rail program, think about holes in the ground, horizontal ones that is. Everything I’ve mentioned above requires tunneling. Indeed, without these tunnels I’d be inclined to give up on passenger rail altogether. You’re either in the business with a serious objective of moving a lot of people, or you should be out.

While you’re about it, Governor Newsom, there are some relatively minor fixes that your administration should take care of, in concert with the Senate and Assembly. First, there should be changes to the composition of the Boards of the Joint Powers Authorities that oversee the “Intercity” and commuter rail Boards. Today, to serve on one of these Boards the sole qualification is to be, or have been, an elected official. There is no requirement to have an industry knowledge, business background, or any other qualification. Unlike many people I have a great admiration for those that put themselves forward and run for office. To have a number of such people on the Boards of public agencies is overall a good thing. They understand about answering to constituents and should be in touch with the wider aspects of the communities served by train, including the local economy, tourism, housing, etc. But many of the issues require some technical knowledge of the way railways work, what types of rolling stock are available, and what technological improvements are in the pipeline that may make obsolete tomorrow the hardware they are purchasing today.

The Technical Advisory Committees (“TAC”) are no help. They are composed almost entirely of agency staffs, usually with a planning or transit background, not railroad. The railroads themselves rarely send their representatives, or if they do they only listen, not participate. California spends well over $100 million just on the three intercity corridors, and it’s probably double that with the federal and local matches. That’s a lot of money for about 20,000 passengers a day. Are we receiving value for money? Are the Boards and TACs asking the hard questions? Governor Newsom should be concerned.

The second issue, a RailPAC “must do” for 2019, is reform or repeal of SB 804 from 1999, the Perata bill that prevents the efficient use of the State sponsored Thruway Bus network. We’ve covered this before so I won’t repeat myself here, other than to say that intercity bus transportation is becoming such a rarity, especially to our smaller communities, that any regulation that impedes the efficient use of the services that we have is obsolete.

Amtrak and the National Network

Lines are being drawn at the National level between a number of railroad advocates highly critical of Amtrak President Anderson and the Amtrak Board, and the Rail Passenger Association, (RPA, formerly known as NARP) which maintains that 80% of Anderson’s policies are good, and that they oppose the other 20%. This is not new. The United Rail Passenger Alliance, (“URPA”) and the Rail Users
Network (“RUN”) have for years voiced their displeasure and frustration at both Amtrak and NARP. There have been two big developments in the last few months. First is the space given in the columns of both Railway Age and Trains magazines to the critics. Second is the apparent agreement between RPA/NARP and both RUN and URPA regarding Amtrak accounting. RPA has published research by George Chilson which has delved deeply into the arcianities of Amtrak’s peculiar systems of cost allocation and drawn similar conclusions to those of URPA’s Andrew Selden and RUN. Unfortunately, this one sphere of agreement has not led to any kind of reconciliation between the various groups.

I’m inclined these days to be more pragmatic. As I have written here many times before, all our discussions and plans for the National Network become irrelevant if the locomotives and coaches wear out. Well, in the last few months we have seen Amtrak move forward in purchasing new locomotives from Siemens (California Built!) and just this week a Request For Proposals for replacing some of the old Amfleet stock has been issued. (See “Amfleet” story in this issue.) But what we have yet to see is an announcement about Superliner refurbishment or replacement and that is a matter for grave concern. As we have reported many times, the Superliner fleet is in terrible shape, to the point that the quality of travel experience is such that I for can cannot recommend it to anyone but a hardened veteran! But, compared to the inaction of previous CEOs of Amtrak, the news on locomotives and Amfleet replacement is a major step forward.

Rumors are flying about Amtrak President Richard Anderson and how long he may continue en poste. There are still major problems with Amtrak governance, and as I discussed above about the State Boards, the Amtrak Board is just awful. The latest batch of nominees are the usual political hacks with no relevant experience to run a major public enterprise.

**Steel Wheels Coalition**

There is growing interest in the western states for the idea of a campaign specifically to protect and grow the “Superliner” long distance trains. RailPAC is coordinating its activities with groups throughout the west to make sure that the Superliners are not left to wear out and the services to fade away.

**SB802 1999 (Perata) – Repeal!**

Long on our to do list is the repeal of this 1999 California legislation that restricts the use of the Thruway buses to Amtrak ticket holders. Designed to protect Greyhound and other operators from “unfair” competition it restricts use of Thruway buses even if no other service is available. Greyhound service has all but disappeared to intermediate rural stops and many small towns. We do not need restrictions and attempts to preserve monopolies. What we need is cooperation between bus and train operators to provide the greatest frequency of service in any corridor. This can be in the form of coordinated schedules and code shares, for example. In our view it’s the only way to rebuild mobility for California outside the major cities. Contact me for more details to help with your local state Senator or Assembly member.

**Locomotives**

I have informed the RailPAC Board that I plan to diminish my role in the organization in the coming months. I have joined forces with Rail Propulsion Systems (“RPS”) of Fullerton to help them grow their business of building emission systems and zero emission locomotives. This is something I really believe in and represents a practical and cost-effective solution for our commuter and intercity routes. After more than a decade leading RailPAC it’s time to bring in some new leadership as well as review our organization in a changing world. RailPAC is a traditional membership-based group with a print publication as well as an online newsletter and website. This type of organization is becoming increasingly rare, and most are suffering from declining membership and a failure to attract the next generations. RailPAC has an extraordinarily loyal group of members and our numbers have remained constant, so I hope that the campaign will continue, and indeed that more of you will participate. We look forward to a serious discussion with all of you in the coming months.

There is also the issue of avoiding any appearance of conflict of interest between my role with RPS and any statements I make on behalf of RailPAC. I believe that RailPAC members support rebuilding locomotives with emission control systems, and developing battery electric switchers etc. but clearly I cannot be seen to use RailPAC’s platform as a means to promote a specific for-profit company. That would put our non-profit status in jeopardy as well as reduce RailPAC’s credibility in the public forum. If you feel you can contribute to the RailPAC leadership and wish to be more active in the group please contact me.

**Conferences and Events this year**

- **April 19th** New Mexico, rally in Las Vegas NM.
- **April 25 -27** Heritage Rail Alliance – Sacramento at the Museum. Heritagerrail.org
- **April 24-25** California Passenger Rail Summit, Oakland CA
- **April 30 - May 2** US High Speed Rail Association, Los Angeles. USHSR.com
- **May 8** State Railroad Museum Sacramento, Golden Spike commemoration.
- **May 4th**. Metro/LAUS Metro.net
- **May 4 - 5** Fullerton Railroad Day.
- **Friday, Oct. 18 - Monday, Oct. 21** RPA/NARP Sacramento.
- **TBD** RailPAC Annual meeting.

And finally... A big thank you to our RailPAC photographers who have kindly provided me with excellent illustrations for the stories in Steel Wheels. Pages and pages of print are dull fare, and who doesn’t like a good picture of a train?

As always, your comments and feedback are welcome.

Paul Dyson
pdyson@railpac.org 818-371-9516
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
California’s Coast Route, “Let’s Make a Deal”

Steve Roberts, RailPAC VP, Policy and Research

Recently Union Pacific Railroad announced that beginning October 1, 2018, in a phased roll-out, it was implementing Precision Scheduled Railroading (PSR) system wide. PSR is a set of operating practices that focus on the maximum utilization and productivity of assets. The goal is to maximize yield on invested capital and increase shareholder value. Many traditional railroad customer services and “efficiency” practices actually resulted in a poor usage of capital assets. As part of PSR practices rail lines, markets served and equipment resources are all put under the microscope.

One underutilized UP route that would seem to be redundant under PSR tenets is California’s Coast Route. (Union Pacific owns between Oakland and Moorpark.) From a system freight perspective, it is circuitous, underutilized and without much current and future online freight potential. Except for local freight service and an occasional through freight, the line is an expensive holdover and congestion safety valve for the UP. From UP’s perspective, what little traffic there is can be drayed to the Central Valley and loaded onto rail cars at load centers or large efficient cold warehouses (perishables). Added to this evaluation is the future risk of rising sea levels, floods and tide enhanced storm surge.

In addition, with segments owned at both ends by public agencies, the Coast Route is a passenger railroad. Metrolink operates a high-frequency commuter service Ventura to LA while Amtrak operates frequent service from LA to Santa Barbara and on to San Luis Obispo. On the north end there is Caltrain service to Gilroy and upcoming commuter rail service sponsored by Monterey County. The publicly blended operations with high-speed rail on both the north and south ends. Given the sum of these factors it would seem that UP would see the Coast Route as a prime candidate for disinvestment (sale) just as CSX (another PSR adherent) recently sold its main route across the Florida Panhandle (Baldwin, near Jacksonville – Pensacola) to a short-line operator.

Given the present and future passenger orientation of the Coast Route it may be wise for route stakeholders (state and local governments and users) to begin planning and strategizing for this eventuality reality rather than waiting until the line sale is announced. One initial push-back would be the expense of such an endeavor, both in terms of initial sale but also in terms of long-term maintenance. In reality California is already responsible for an increasingly large portion of the route maintenance and capital expenses. Another issue is that while there is significant passenger rail activity between San Luis Obispo – Santa Barbara and Los Angeles there is little activity north of San Luis Obispo. However, as shown in the Table below the inter-regional travel between the Central Coast (Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz counties) and the San Francisco Bay Area is the 5th largest interregional travel market in California. It is larger than the 6th largest, Central Coast to the LA Basin (Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties). Meanwhile segments of US 101, even today, are severely congested. The Central Coast to the San Francisco Bay Area is ripe for passenger rail development.
In addition if UP focuses on minimizing costs, sells the route to another operator or if the route is severed by a natural disaster, California’s costs will rise as the Coast Route becomes more and more a passenger only railroad (i.e. Raton Pass). If the state/counties purchase the rail line they will control the destiny of the infrastructure. They will also be able to decide whether to purchase the line as a public asset (as are the north and south segments), the governance structure and who might be the short-line and public/private funding partners. Another consideration is that the Coast Route is important not only for its transportation value but also as a sea wall protecting segments of US 101. It also provides important transportation redundancy something that cannot be fully leveraged with UP ownership.

One of the benefits of the state and counties buying the Coast Line is that they would gain ownership of the excess capacity that exists on segments of the line today. Capacity requirements can be set for the needs of the passenger operation, not locked up to protect a theoretical freight rail line capacity of 20 through freight trains per day, a volume unlikely to appear. This protection of theoretical freight capacity drives future service expansion capital needs. Passenger oriented ownership would mean more passenger rail frequencies with less capacity investment (i.e. extended sidings). This would be a partial offset to the purchase price.

State/county ownership changes the relationship with the freight carriers. Any freight trains operated under the agreement would have to fit the existing sidings and siding spacings or the freight railroad would pay to extend the sidings.

Investments can be tailored to suit a passenger/short line railroad. Negotiations would settle whether UP continues to operate any through trains, where the short-line interchanges should be, alternate route emergency access, etc. How these are settled will determine the price. The more rights/revenue the UP retains, the lower the price for the line will be. When the state/counties negotiate with the short line partner they can set the parameters of the service addressing both initiatives to grow traffic as well as minimizing passenger/freight interference. Since the short line is getting a first class railroad, with no capital cost, their investments would target freight growth (i.e. rebuild or add drill tracks, lengthened spurs, etc.) and to minimize passenger train conflicts. Local stakeholders, counties and the state can work with retail oriented short line operators to rebuild carload freight traffic (as has been done elsewhere). Public/private partnerships could build load centers, and new efficient refrigerated warehouses for the loading of perishables.

From Union Pacific’s perspective sale of California’s Coast Line would provide early evidence of PSR principles in unlocking the value of a low-productivity asset providing funds for investments, such as double-track or lengthened siding on core routes, or creating additional value for stockholders.

Right now this is still all speculation. For the moment, RailPAC can focus on developing a strategy and message to introduce and educate stakeholders on this issue.
I think that most of you know that I’m a former Southern Pacific person and was the commercial representative for the south end of the Coast line, downtown Los Angeles to San Luis Obispo, from 1991 until 1995. Due to lack of investment the SP was having a hard time keeping the system fluid, so it was becoming tougher all the time to maintain a decent service to the customers on line. The sales crew, including the late Liz Heim, Bob Riske, Pete Harmon and others worked closely with the Train Masters and Superintendent to solve problems and keep shippers and receivers happy, that is until the Union Pacific took over in 1995.

But no matter what efforts are made, changes in industry, customer demand and competition from motor carriers and intermodal have eaten away at the book of business over the past three decades. Here’s a few examples:

**Sugar beet**, closure of the Betteravia Imperial Holly beet refinery in 1993. Part of the reason for closure is that the wooden gondolas used had reached the end of their service lives.

**Diatomaceous Earth**: Conversion of much of the boxcar traffic from Johns Manville at White Hills to intermodal when intermodal was deregulated. Reduced demand for DE as cheaper products became available.

**Los Angeles Times** – closure of Northridge printing plant as the demand for print media declined.

**Anheuser Busch Van Nuys** – Union Pacific priced the boxcar business out of existence and the loading tracks were paved over to make way for more truck loading.

Granite Rock still operates unit trains from Logan to distribution yards in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The Santa Maria Valley Railway, the Ventura County Railway, and Santa Cruz and Monterey Bay Short Lines continue to offer service, perhaps in spite of indifferent connections by Union Pacific.

This constant erosion of traffic, with little new industry of the type that uses rail, has left us with a two or three times a week hauler between West Colton and Guadalupe, and a similar service between Watsonville Junction and Roseville. The only through freights are auto carriers and empty stack train cars that could go via the Valley route. If there is a future for the Coast Line, it is as a passenger railroad, it’s hard to believe that there is sufficient freight traffic to sustain it.
Do you remember the first time you rode on Amtrak? The anticipation, the questions you asked of yourself, is this the right train, how will I know when to get off, can I move around, where’s the bathroom, do they have anything to eat on the train, do I have to sit facing backwards? There is some apprehension for the first time Amtrak passenger; even for us seasoned travelers coming into a new station can cause a little anxiety. Many of us frequent Amtrakers have been stopped by some first timer and asked a question or two. Well, at some stations if you look around you might find an Amtrak Station Host Volunteer ready to answer travelers’ questions and assist them on their journey.

Here in California, specifically along the San Joaquin, Capital Corridor and Pacific Surfliner route, we have about 45 Volunteers at 12 stations. With the support of Amtrak and the appropriate Joint Powers Authority, these volunteers are all part of the Station Host Association of California which provides an invaluable service to Amtrak passengers, potential passengers, and to the Amtrak staff.

The Association was started in 2001 by Doras Briggs who had retired as an assistant to the vice president at the University of California, Berkeley. She also was a member of the Amtrak Customer Advisory Committee and a Director of the National Association of Railroad Passengers (NARP), now the Rail Passengers Association. Doras, and 22 other volunteers initially began the program and blossomed at one point to 60 plus members. Since then our membership fluctuates to our present level. The Host Volunteers cover a wide range of members, many of us are retired professionals, some continue with their full time or part time employment, our age range and diversity is a board reflection of the people we serve along the routes. What we are not are eccentric rail fans, we are people fans.

Our passion is with the Amtrak passengers, we help ensure they get on the right train at the right time. In doing this we also assist Amtrak Staff by eliminating their having to stop an important function to answer simple questions. We are not there to replace anyone, rather to augment what is already there. Answering questions is just one part of what we do, handing our bathroom tokens, restocking informational brochures, retrieving luggage carts for passengers, guiding a visually impaired person through a busy platform, maneuvering a wheel chair bound person toward the handicapped ramp of the coach (we do not operate the lift) or assisting a passenger with the Quik-Trak kiosks. The duties and numbers of passenger contacts vary at each of our stations we host. Bakersfield for example is the southern terminus of the San Joaquin route, (with a yearly average of passenger of 482,000+) from there, passengers are guided to any of the 7 busses headed to Southern California or east to Las Vegas. Modesto, on the other hand, with 115,000 passengers per year and no buses seems pretty mellow but with one track, passengers must be sure there are headed in the right direction. Sacramento, which serves more than 1 million passengers, needs more than one Host at a time to cover the expansive platform and terminal area. Others Stations we Host: Fresno, Merced, Stockton, Davis, Martinez, Emeryville, Oakland, San Jose, & San Luis Obispo. All total, we log in excess of 6,000 Volunteer Hours per year. Some hosts have hundreds of hours on the books by the end of the year, others not so much. But we all do what we can, based on our schedule and availability.

The Station Host Association is guided by an Executive Board (all active Station Hosts) Bylaws and an Operations Manual. We work in union with the respective Joint Powers Authority, Amtrak administration including, District Mangers, Public Relations and Operations Staff, Amtrak Police, and Marketing. More importantly we work hand in hand with the local Amtrak Agents to provide the best passenger experience for our Amtrak guest. We are only one small part of their traveling experience, which we strive to make it the most positive.

If you would like to play a positive part in their experience, if you enjoy helping others, if you have a few hours to spare, we’d love to hear from you. Please contact me at vicepresident@stationhost.org or check out our web page at www.stationhost.org where you will also find an online application.

Armando Soliz is currently the Vice President of the Station Host Association of California and is also an active Station Host in Bakersfield.

BECOME A Volunteer Station Host
Host at select Amtrak Capital Corridor & San Joaquin stations.
*Plus San Luis Obispo

stationhost.org/volunteer
Everything is bigger in Texas...at least that's what is the common presumption over here. In the case of passenger rail transportation, while Amtrak is represented by the Texas Eagle and the Sunset Limited and the state-supported Heartland Flyer, nothing new has been added by them in decades. Not so with locally supported rail projects. In the Dallas-Ft. Worth-Denton “Metroplex” more new projects have come on line recently than in most other states including California. Dallas County’s DART, and the TRE between Dallas and Ft. Worth have been around for some time. Denton County added the “A Train” in this decade, and DART added its new line from downtown to DFW Airport’s Terminal A and they also have expansion plans in downtown Dallas.

Two projects that started up in this decade are now on the books. In Dallas County, the “Cotton Belt Route” as it is now called, will connect the eastern part of its north area to DFW’s Terminal B, and is now funded. It will be next decade before it is finished. The other project, Tarrant County’s TexRail is NOW OPEN, as service began January 10 on its 27-mile route from downtown Ft. Worth also to DFW’s Terminal B. Like the TRE, it originates at the former Texas & Pacific station and uses the Transit Center that also sees Amtrak’s Texas Eagle.

TexRail has two unique features in its startup that most new projects don’t have: Hourly service 21 hours a day, with the first departure from the T&P station at 3:25 AM, and the last train arriving back there the next morning at 1:41 AM. We presume that schedule is designed for Airport employees to arrive for work whenever their shifts start as well as for travelers who would take early morning flights or even “redeyes.” This is a bold move on the part of TexRail, and so is the “memory” scheduling of trains to arrive/depart at the same time at each station each hour. The fares are reasonable, too: one-way tickets are $2.50, day passes within the County are $5, and regional passes that include the DART system are $12. Projected first year daily ridership is an optimistic 8,000 riders. January rides are free.

The photo shows a TexRail train arriving at one of the intermediate stations in Grapevine. This station is located at Main Street, in a historic “village” setting which has been the origin point of the tourist train, the “Grapevine Vintage Railroad” which runs weekends from Grapevine to Ft. Worth using restored old cars. Main Street has many shops and restaurants within walking distance of the train station. On the day this photo was taken, January 13, the air temperature was 39 degrees, yet a large group of people got off this train to spend time in that town and supposedly re-board for their trips home.

TexRail trains are Stadler FLIRTd3 diesel multiple unit trainsets, and each trainset seats 229 passengers. Eight vehicles were purchased. The original project had the western end point in West Ft. Worth, but the money wasn’t there to extend it that far, although that could be a future project and the railroad would not have to buy additional vehicles. The line is single track, but each station is double tracked for meets, which would be necessary if half-hourly service became possible. A long bridge was built over Interstate 114/121 for the trains to access the Airport.

Now it’s up to the riders to decide if this project is worth it by riding it. It is built for success. BUT, with both the Dallas County project and TexRail using the former Southern Pacific’s “Cotton Belt Route” and meeting in the middle at DFW Terminal B, it’s only logical that there be through service, right? Or that Denton County’s A-Train would connect with either through service or connecting service. Not so at this time! Why? The answer now is that these projects are all in three separate counties, each with its own governing boards and financing sources. Of course! The last station before entering the Airport is at the “North Airport” station, which is the logical place for connecting the two projects. Right now, when the Dallas County project is built it would require a transfer there in order to continue from one to the other before the two lines converge and enter the Airport. What’s worse, the A-Train ends one mile from the Dallas County project, so someone wanting to travel to the Airport would have to transfer to DART, then transfer again to the Airport line a mile away.

While TexRail is a well designed, very functional railroad serving a large area of people, except for transfers from the TRE in Ft. Worth and some bus line connections, the matrix
Mr. Plous’s article regarding the development of a comprehensive Intercity passenger rail policy (Steel Wheels 4th Quarter 2018), is an excellent overview of one major piece of the intercity rail puzzle and something that needs to be on the table during discussion of the upcoming passenger rail authorization process (with or without Amtrak). It also provides part of the reason why changing Amtrak’s President or Board changes nothing. Amtrak is fulfilling its current Congressional mandate; NE freight railroad profitability, stewardship of the NEC, aggressive cost controls and caretaker operation of the National Network until discontinuance. To change Amtrak’s focus advocates need to change the directives to it from Congress, hence a new policy.

There is one thing rail advocates need to be realistic about if, as part of the upcoming authorization, there is discussion and forward movement on intercity passenger rail policy coupled significant proposal for capital investment. Accompanying any policy will be a “zero based” analysis of what the passenger rail network should look like, just as there was in 1970. While rail advocates will have some input they should be prepared for a network that is not a reenergized copy of the long-distance network that existed in the late 1960’s. The process will be driven by professional rail planners, politicians, state DOT’s with a healthy dose of lobbying from the freight railroads. My guess is that what you are likely to get is the regionally focused network with some long-distance trains linking the regional networks.

There are some real challenges:
1. First, unlike 1971 the freight railroads are not desperate to stem the cash losses from operating their own passenger trains. Also they now know that this not a “5-year and out” deal;
2. Second, rail passenger service structurally is opposite the other modes where the government provides the infrastructure, geared to providing capacity, and private carriers operate, with a few exceptions, financially independent to succeed or fail. Rail passenger service is operated on private rail lines focused on maximizing high-yielding traffic on the minimum of infrastructure. Congress prefers the former, it is discrete and easier to manage;
3. With freight rail capacity issues and the need to re-equip the long-distance fleet, the “caretaker” strategy for the National Network has reached a major decision point;
4. Those focused on minimizing budget expenditures will oppose any large rail oriented capital program (see Mr. Plous’s section on the FAA, over 1,000 had to die to get Federal involvement). Rail carriers are concerned that any large Federal capex program would bring with it a demand for open access on their rail lines;
5. For the most part the freight rail capacity needed is for network bottlenecks or capacity to match growth. So while you can’t operate a viable intercity passenger train without the investment, it is all freight related. As a result the cost/benefit ratio is almost zero if capex funding is channeled through an intercity passenger budget;
6. Finally, there is a perception issue. Parochially focused state politicians who have no interest in service over a state line (unless it is say a few miles i.e. St. Louis) and the professional planners will strictly look at potential ridership volumes. The problem is that the planners and politicians will design a rail network they think they will ride, which means short-distance corridor/regional trains.

So as Mr. Plous indicates, developing a comprehensive intercity passenger rail policy will be long and very hard. Also, like many Federal Transit investments it should include a public benefit calculation. Looking on the positive side, compared to 1970, we now know that there is a large interest in traveling by rail, many states are developing regional intercity passenger train routes, there is a mechanism in place (FAST ACT TIGER/BUILD programs) to address specific network capacity issues outside of the intercity passenger capital budget, the market based restructuring of the US air and motor coach networks has created many unserved or underserved city pairs and the regional intercity passenger rail networks that are being created provide a foundation for a National Network of some kind.

Texrail Starts Up In Texas...

A New Project With Good Ideas (continued)

for growth is not there. Yet. Maybe some day? We can only hope. The weak point here as well as other rail passenger lines in other states is, “does it go somewhere that people want to go?” In the case of TexRail, downtown Ft. Worth, the Airport, and Grapevine are excellent destinations. From the first week of riders seen using it they agree. Yep, everything is big in Texas...even on the railroads. Now let’s get the Sunset Limited daily and build the other rail projects that need doing in the Lone Star State.
In my last missive, I told how we at All Aboard Arizona marshaled the journalistic, commercial and political forces of our state in a campaign to “Save the Southwest Chief.” We can’t claim full credit, for we were just a player in a greater scheme put forward by the Rail Passengers Association, but we achieved the necessary results. The US Senate voted – unanimously! – to kill Amtrak’s proposal to turn the Chief into two trains with a bus link in the middle – at least for the current fiscal year. It’s a temporary victory, and we intend to maintain a position of vigilance with respect to Amtrak.

The Amtrak Inspector General’s report was an eye-opener, and it explained a lot of what was going on behind the scenes. The official excuse for breaking the Chief into three pieces was the Positive Train Control issue, in that the segment to be replaced by a bus lacked PTC. It turned out that Amtrak’s concern was the bottom line. Amtrak’s non-standard (non-GAAP) accounting system placed the Chief at the head of the line for elimination due to losses and also claimed that the interstate trains lost $500 million per year. A standard (GAAP) accounting system would have shown a completely different result, but Amtrak’s primary concern has always been the Northeast Corridor. The report gave us a hint of what the Amtrak board might try in the future, and “forewarned is forearmed!”

We had a successful annual meeting in Tucson with some 60 attendees, and Amtrak was kind enough to send its Chicago team to Arizona to present Amtrak’s future plans. A daily Sunset Limited was “under serious consideration.” So was the renewal of Sunset service from New Orleans east to Florida, something that had been suspended since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. Not that I would ever want to be a skeptic, but “I’ve heard this song before.” We’ll be keeping a close eye on what Amtrak says versus what it actually does.

Brightline has taken on a minority stake by Sir Richard Branson, and in 2019 it will be re-branded Virgin Trains USA. The newly re-branded entity is concentrating on its Florida and Las Vegas projects. This changes the scope of what we’ve proposed to Brightline as our Phoenix-Tucson line along the Union Pacific right-of-way. Like Fortress Investment Group, which is Brightline’s majority owner, Sir Richard has real estate development as his major goal. But Virgin also likes to think in terms of vacation destinations, which is why Florida and Las Vegas have become key priorities. Phoenix-Tucson may become a starter line that would reach west eventually to originate in Los Angeles and serve Palm Springs, which like Phoenix and Tucson is a major golfing destination.

Our Phoenix light rail project received a major blow. The Phoenix City Council approved the future South Central Phoenix extension of Valley Metro Rail. Then a petition to channel all future Phoenix light rail money into highways received twice the necessary number of signatures. We’re working with a number of local groups to fight this initiative, which may appear on the ballot as early as May. The basic issue is the number of highway lanes on South Central Avenue, but a lot of outside money has come to town to make this happen. Stay tuned!

Gene Caywood - Sunset Limited takes fuel at Tucson
Another “Express” bites the dust – *doesn’t anyone learn from past experience?*

Comments from Steve Roberts, Noel Braymer, Russ Jackson and Anthony Lee

From the staff report to the San Joaquin Joint Powers Authority:

After nearly eight months in operation, ridership on the Morning Express Train (701) remains very low and current trends suggest it is not likely to increase. Low ridership on the Morning Express Train has negatively impacted San Joaquins revenue and farebox recovery. Poor on-time performance in this time slot has certainly impacted the ability to attract and sustain Morning Express ridership, but based upon passenger comments, the limited amount of service available and the large amount of pad-time at the end of the schedule have also contributed to low ridership. The impact from the low ridership of the Morning Express Train on revenue is exacerbated since most of the Morning Express riders are taking relatively short distance trips and many are taking advantage of discounted (multi-ride) fares. Farebox recovery has also been declining since Amtrak has shown very little operating cost savings from reducing the distance served by the Morning Express Train.

In order to increase San Joaquins ridership, revenue and farebox recovery, staff are recommending that SJJPA take action to return to full-corridor service for all 7 daily round trips (7 days a week) in April/May 2019. The Team is recommending that this schedule be a “slotted” schedule where all San Joaquin trains meet at specified double-track sections and a pulsed schedule where trains leave from Bakersfield and Oakland every two hours. The Team is also working on distributing the pad time more evenly throughout the corridor and overnight track maintenance windows. These changes will help increase ridership and revenue and also set the stage for being able to re-introduce Morning Express Service as part of future service expansion.

How the new “slotted” schedule will work on a heavily congested freight railroad will be interesting. Also of interest to this group may be the following paragraph that is buried in the report: “Amtrak originally projected that operating cost reductions from the deployment of Morning Express would offset potential decreases in revenue. Unfortunately, these operating cost reductions have not materialized, and the monthly invoices have actually increased. Staff and Counsel are auditing expense line items which may result in credits back to SJJPA”

Steve Roberts comments:

One of the decisions made during January’s SJJPA Board meeting was the decision to no longer offer the Sacramento Morning Express round-trip from Fresno to Sacramento and to go back to a full 7 train schedule to Bakersfield in April. This revised schedule would also provide better connectivity with the Surfliners. When this proposal first came up I remember Noel (Braymer) advising against it citing the larger total fare of longer distance riders. I agreed with him and noted that when this often requested service was forecast with the California Demand Model it always generated less ticket revenue than a through train to Bakersfield. However, given the route’s continued lackluster performance even after the new 7th frequency was added, I thought it was worth a test. It also represented an effort by the SJJPA to try a different strategy. Well Noel and the demand model were right. Ridership plateaued at about 50 to 60 riders per train. Of course, it did not help that every exporter and importer dumped a huge amount of traffic on the freight railroads trying to beat the tariffs. Added to that freight congestion were the ongoing teething issues with PTC.

One of the lessons learned again is that a service initiative that substitutes a new targeted service (i.e. limited stop express, partial route train, etc.) for an existing frequency must perform extraordinarily well in order to succeed because it has to make up for the lost revenue of the train it replaced before it can show positive results. As a result any new service should be layered on top of the existing service.

Editor’s note: Basic railroading 101 will tell you that you need line capacity to run an express train. With mixed traffic, particularly unscheduled slowmoving freight trains, and a single track railroad, the chances of successfully running a limited or non-stop train on time without enormous padding in the timetable are close to zero. It has been tried three times between San Diego and Los Angeles and failed. The staff report quoted above mentions trying again in the future, presumably to keep the politicians happy. This is not the way to run a railroad!
I just returned from a one-way, inbound trip on the Coast Starlight, from San Jose to Los Angeles, traveling in a roomette. As everyone knows, the service on all long-distance trains (incl. the Starlight) is slowly rolling downhill, especially concerning the dining food & service. Nevertheless, this latest ride was nice and relaxing -- albeit a long one; however, I personally prefer to spend 11 hours on a comfortable train, rather than 6 hours on a crowded bus (I took FlixBus going outbound... -- FlixBus ain't that bad, but it has its own set of issues, which is a whole different story!..)

As far the famous Starlight, overall -- no Earth-shattering changes (just yet!). Mostly, business as usual. Sadly, the Pacific Parlour car is long-gone; and the Starlight without the Pacific Parlour car is like Hollywood without the Walk-of-Fame... Hopefully, though, when the Amtrak CEO is replaced (which is on the horizon), we could have another shot at trying to get the Pacific Parlour car back.

The on-time performance was impressive; our train arrived into L.A. 30 min. early (in sharp contrast to the northbound train that we met along the way -- it was running almost 3 hours late!), and the ride was mostly smooth; though some portions of the old track have noticeably detonated, particularly on a segment just a couple of hours north of Santa Barbara. But overall, not a bad ride, considering the age of the railroad track and the age of the Superliners rolling on that track.

The dining service deserves special attention, but we'll get to that a bit later.

One small (but noticeable) thing really annoyed me on this latest trip: it is Amtrak’s obsession with its “Emergency Exit” warning labels & indicators weren’t enough, Amtrak decided to decorate their windows even further, and used their profound creativity to install this beautiful piece of “art” onto the last remaining clean portion of the windows: the middle frames now have these bright “Emergency Exit” sparkling letters! Probably, the next step for Amtrak would be to design new wallpaper -- made of “Emergency Exit” writings all over -- and attach it on all cars’ walls and doors...

Away from sarcasm, this latest ridiculous vertical window label has successfully ruined any & all aesthetics! Amtrak apparently doesn’t know when to draw the line, and doesn’t realize that the more “Emergency” warning labels you try to impose upon us, the more obtrusive it becomes. Clearly, this was a totally unnecessary addition, indicative of Amtrak’s obsession (or paranoia?) with the warning labels and their lack of taste or aesthetics.

Now, as to the issue of the diner food and service:

- First and foremost, the train has completely run out of all (!) salads and dinner rolls for the second evening of their dinner service. Which doesn’t speak too highly of their management and planning (what a surprise!) That’s right, no appetizer garden salads or bread was served for dinner, at all. When inquired from the diner employees about the shortage, I got contradictory information. The waitress clearly said that the shortage was “because Amtrak needs to save money”; meaning, salads and bread rolls were deliberately undersupplied. However, the dining car steward said that they simply “ran out of food due to the holiday” -- meaning, it was inadvertent...

I would like to believe the steward’s opinion; however, Amtrak’s reputation dictates that this shortage may have been deliberate -- and could become a new norm for the dining train service. Only time will tell; in fact, they’re now so standardized across all long-distance routes, that on the dining table of the Starlight you could see the menus from practically all long-distance trains, including the...
“Coast Starlight Menu”, “Empire Builder Menu”, and “Sunset Limited Menu” -- all in the same single dining car!

- A couple of dinner entrees were completely crossed-out, as they've been discontinued;
- Kids’ menu has not improved a bit; it’s shameful that Amtrak continues to feed our children with a high-carb, high-salt, high-cholesterol diet, with barely any vitamins, minerals, or fiber;
- Just a few years ago, the Starlight served the clam chowder, a large plate of garden salad with shrimp, and other decent choices; but not today! All those improved meals have disappeared... and the unhealthy (to say the least) lunch selection are an embarrassment;
- The “cattle call” approach is still well in effect, including forced “community seating” and other socialistic dining service rules. If only Amtrak officials were to pull their heads out of the sand... and recall the successful experiment that was conducted years ago -- where the dining car was open 24 hours, with rotating shifts. The experiment was successful, and demonstrated much better service, less employee fatigue, and an overall much better, welcoming environment and a customer-oriented approach.

The final issue is, unfortunately no more printed timetables... Which is kind of a nuisance. This forces the passengers to be glued to the smartphones even more (we’re now forced to go online -- and see where the heck we are, and what's the next station) Thankfully, some of the sleeper cars have a copy of the printed schedules posted on the wall in the hallway -- so we could follow along, without going online each time. But all in all, lack of timetables is very inconvenient, to say the least.

To conclude: Amtrak long-distance trains are still very popular, and are packed during the holidays. as witnessed first-hand. Hopefully, with the upcoming resignation of Richard H. Anderson, things will start improving -- especially the dining car service. We shall see...

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A quiet day at Paso Robles depot.
Finally – A Replacement for the Amfleet One
Reproduced from Progressive Railroading with comments below by the Editor.

Amtrak late last week released a request for proposals (RFP) for a new fleet of single-level passenger-rail vehicles to replace the Amfleet I cars.

Amfleet I cars are used primarily on the Northeast Corridor (NEC) and adjacent state corridor routes.

“Nearly half of Amtrak’s annual ridership is comprised of trips along the [NEC] and adjoining corridors, and this new state-of-the-art equipment will provide customers with an enjoyable and efficient travel experience,” said Amtrak Vice President of Corporate Planning Byron Comati in a press release.

The new rail cars and trainsets must include all necessary equipment for positive train control technology and meet recently updated federal Tier I safety standards for equipment operating at speeds up to 125 mph, Amtrak officials said.

The new units will replace Amtrak’s fleet of 470 Amfleet I and ex-Metroliner cars. The Amfleet I units are over 40 years old, while Amtrak’s fleet of ex-Metroliner equipment entered service 50 years ago this week for predecessor Penn Central Railroad.

The base order includes 75 trainsets or their rail-car equivalents, with options to provide equipment for future service growth along the NEC and other state-supported routes. Although Amfleet I cars recently were refurbished with new seating upholstery and carpeting, the fleet’s age and industry-standard lead times for new equipment requires that the replacement effort begin now, Amtrak officials said.

Ed: I believe that my first train ride in the USA (1980, San Diegan) was in an Amfleet car, and I have to confess that I was greatly disappointed. The seats were large and comfortable, granted, but the general ambience, the high set windows, the ride and the noise once we started rolling left much to be desired. For many Californians this was their introduction to train travel and, since passenger traffic continued to grow, I can only assume that they didn’t know any better! Now, finally, at least the first series cars are to be replaced. We have to be thankful for their longevity, given the lack of a continual replacement program which we have requested for so long. We also have to be thankful that very few have been in service in California for many years, thanks to the California Car and its second generation Surfliner car. Now, let’s hope that our friends in the east and Midwest will get to enjoy a far superior product to go with their shiny new locomotives.

I have read some comments on railroad blogs about this and I see that many passenger rail supporters have fond recollections of early trips in these cars, and the preceeding Metroliner. It’s also worthy of note that these were the last passenger product of the Budd company, and with their demise went a lot of skill and experience of working with stainless steel.

We hope that one of the design specifications is that ALL of the passengers should be able to see outside the car from their seat. Too often this is lost in the desire to maximize the number of seats per car. At the 2016 Steel Wheels Conference in Sacramento Siemens executive Armin Kick revealed that the new cars being built for Brightline would have their seats and windows aligned, to the spontaneous applause of the audience. Second, let’s not have this:

Amtrak’s RFP closes Feb. 13.

Are all of these labels really necessary?.
We want to look through the window, not at it.

Photo credit: Alek Friedman

There is a good chance that Siemens will be selected to build these cars, likely based on the Brightline design. We are intrigued to see who will bid, and what designs they offer. If Siemens is successful, who would have predicted a decade ago that California would be the leading manufacturing State for both locomotive and mainline passenger vehicles.
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.
You will recall the infamous decision by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Agency (“Metro”) to suspend the Raymer – Bernson double track project and return the already programmed funds to the State. (September 20, 2018 Metro Board). The action was precipitated by a loud, and effective, campaign by a few residents who managed to convince their neighbors that they would be incinerated by exploding oil trains. Instead of pushing back and attempting to educate the residents and offer remediation the elected representatives, led by Los Angeles County Supervisor Sheila Kuehl, pandered to this tiny minority and effectively canned the project.

There are other factors which didn’t help. Metrolink told Metro that because there are no timed meets on this section in their plans, therefore double tracking is not essential. Metro quickly interpreted this to mean that Metrolink did not want the project. Meanwhile City Council member Englander and Assembly Member Matt Dubabneh jumped on the bandwagon. When we visited Dubabneh’s office we found a staff member tasked with finding evidence that double track railroads are more dangerous than single track (I kid you not). Meanwhile, at the State level, there was such a backlog of projects needing money that Calstar was more than ready to reallocate the funds rather than wait for Metro to come to their senses.

This seemed like a death knell, not only for this 6.4 miles of vital double track in a busy, mixed traffic corridor, but also for sensible investment in regional rail in general. If a project that was identified as far back as 1991 in a Caltrans study could be so easily dumped, what hope is there for the rest of the corridor, indeed for passenger rail in California?

Fortunately, we have two experienced and committed advocates in the San Fernando Valley who will not take “No” for an answer. Bart Reed is Executive Director of The Transit Coalition and has spent the last 20 years campaigning for improved mobility, especially in the San Fernando Valley. Jason Ackerman is a member of the Van Nuys Neighborhood Council within the city of Los Angeles They are convinced, as am I and the RailPAC Board, that both Surfliner and Metrolink services need this investment to increase capacity and improve reliability. At the same time the underperforming Northridge Station would be moved to Reseda Boulevard to be closer to CSUN and it’s 40,000 students and transit connections.

Bart and Jason have launched a campaign to change Metro’s decision and get this project back on the agenda. The good news is that a couple of the residents that led the disinformation campaign are no longer with us. Furthermore, City Council member Englander and Assembly member Dubabneh have both resigned for various unrelated reasons, so that we have a clean slate with at least two key offices. Bart and Jason are working hard using existing relationships with such organizations as Valley Industry and Commerce Association (“VICA”), the Neighborhood Councils along the route, and Cal State University Northridge (“CSUN”).

There is no doubt that we were blindsided by this NIMBY campaign, and even more so by the support received from politicians, especially the Metro Board. Bart, Jason and RailPAC are trying to fix something that should never have happened, and we will continue to support them until the right decision has been made.

Mayor Garcetti Drops Presidential Bid

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti announced late in January that he will not be running for President. We join the Los Angeles Times in applauding that decision. We remind him that the City of Los Angeles has a budget (and a population) larger than many countries, and there are many problems to work at. RailPAC will do all we can to convince the Mayor that regional and intercity rail deserve his attention. If he will use his power as Mayor to give us a world class Union Station and the rail infrastructure to support it then he will find his place in the history books as one of our great city mayors.
Railroaders at Work
photos by Albert Borden

For more images go to AlbertBorden.com

Thanks for all you do to keep us going!
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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