

Empire Builder Struggles to Keep On Schedule

Amtrak's *Empire Builder* left every station in Montana more than 30 minutes late every day in October and trains routinely have been hours late over the entire route the past three months. Things are only just starting to improve, at least in terms of punctuality of departure from the station of origin.

This is the result of huge growth in BNSF freight traffic, primarily Bakken shale—both outbound oil and inbound supplies including sand—but also a record harvest in the upper Midwest. The shale boom will cause US crude oil production to come close to its record in three years, the US Energy Information Administration predicts.

Veteran railroaders along the route say they have never seen freight operations this backed up. Congestion stretches all the way between St. Paul and Seattle.

There is no indication of when freight congestion will clear up. Thus, to improve passenger operations, Amtrak in early December added another train set



Ralph's Blog at Eagle River Nordic (www.ernordic.com/~ralph)

Eastbound *Empire Builder* passing Izaak Walton Inn in Essex, MT in Jan. 2011.

to the *Builder* pool. This should reduce instances of very late departures from originating terminals due to late arrivals of inbound trains.

Because equipment and crews were so far out of sync, three eastbound and two westbound departures were canceled December 11-15 before the extra

set became available, though Amtrak ran St. Paul-east and Spokane-Seattle "stub" trains, and provided Spokane-Portland motorcoaches.

To address the freight congestion, BNSF says they are adding capacity "as fast we can," including double-tracking in eastern Montana, and adding passing sidings and staging tracks.

Also, work to repair and flood-proof the line through Devils Lake is nearing completion.

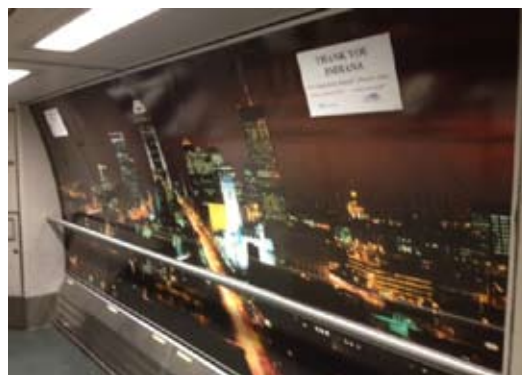
At a senior-level meeting Dec. 12, Amtrak officials formulated an *Empire Builder* "get well" plan similar to that

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NARP, Amtrak Thank Hoosier State Riders

Grassroots citizen advocates, with the help of NARP, the Midwest High Speed Rail Association and other organizations, achieved the preservation of Amtrak's Chicago-Indianapolis *Hoosier State* by winning state support for its operation. To celebrate this and thank riders for their patronage, NARP members Doug Yerkeson and Joe Krause, along with volunteers Ed Ufkes and Derek Zollinger, organized a unique mobile thank-you event.

They arranged for Amtrak to add a café car to the Sunday, Dec. 1 round-trip of the *Hoosier State*, which doesn't usually offer food service. A veteran Amtrak attendant gave free coffee, water, soft drinks and snacks to many of the 320 passengers who rode that day. Twelve of them signed up for



Doug Yerkeson

Mural of Indianapolis skyline installed in an Amfleet I café car to recognize Hoosiers' groundswell of support for Amtrak service through the state's center.

NARP's email list. Amtrak also covered over the regular backdrop in front of the service counter with a mural of the Indianapolis skyline (photo).

The volunteers, with the new organization Hoosiers for Passenger Rail, are

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Budget Deal: Better, but Not What's Needed to Advance Trains

The bipartisan Murray-Ryan budget agreement that the House passed Dec. 12 and the Senate Dec. 18 means that the appropriations committees are developing how much Amtrak and other programs will get for the current fiscal year (through Sept. 30, 2014).

The agreement does reduce the impact of sequestration, and would seem to allow appropriators to provide Amtrak with around \$1.4 billion. This is a slight increase over the 2013 level of \$1.3 billion, but far below real needs.

If House-Senate conferees fail to reach agreement, the result could be another continuing resolution—and no funding increase at all. Failure could result from House Republicans insisting on anti-California high speed rail language the Senate would reject.

Continue to remind your Senators and Representative that funding for Amtrak and passenger trains should be a top priority. Call (202) 224-3121 or visit www.senate.gov or www.house.gov. ■

AROUND THE NATIONAL NETWORK

A Dec. 12 report by five Virginia groups sees more, faster trains, and more reliable Amtrak service in Virginia over the next 15 years. Virginians for High Speed Rail, Southern Environmental Law Center, and the Hampton Roads, Richmond and Roanoke Chambers of Commerce sponsored the report, “The Case for Virginia’s Regional Trains” (www.bit.ly/vatrains).

In Colorado, 13 counties on Dec. 3 endorsed a resolution to have Amtrak’s Southwest Chief continue to serve existing stations plus Pueblo. This was at a meeting of the Southern District of Colorado Counties, where NARP Council Rep. Jim Souby briefed County Commissioners on the train’s importance to the state. State Sen. Larry Crowder’s (R-Alamosa) bill would create a finance authority able to provide state funds for the *Chief*. The Amtrak-BNSF track maintenance contract ends Jan. 20, 2016, but arrangements for what follows—if the *Chief* is to survive—must be made much sooner.

The Louisiana Dept. of Transportation endorsed the idea of a train linking Shreveport and Bossier City eastward across northern Louisiana to the Mississippi River, and committed \$250,000 for a feasibility study. This compliments a Texas DOT/Amtrak study, funded by a grant obtained by the East Texas Corridor Council (ETCC), for a Shreveport/Bossier City-Dallas/Fort Worth higher-speed train link. Plans envision ultimately extending the route east to Meridian, MS, restoring a connection the national passenger train

system missing since the 1960s.

ETCC Chairman Richard Anderson told public radio station KDAQ that the Texas/Louisiana team is working to coordinate the two projects, and considers the Dallas-Shreveport route at least as viable as Amtrak’s Fort Worth-Oklahoma City *Heartland Flyer*. ETCC members await the final rail study report. Anderson is a former Harrison County Judge (equivalent to county executive in some states) and former state senator, and is married to NARP Council Rep. Christina Anderson.

The American Public Transportation Association (APTA), a trade group representing transit agencies and commuter railroads, asked Congress to invest at least \$50 billion over the next six years “to facilitate the development of a modern passenger rail system.” The proposal approved by APTA’s Board of Directors calls for intercity passenger rail including, where appropriate, high-speed corridors, to become an integral part of federal transportation policy and funding. It cites these rationales: meeting critical mobility needs and spurring economic development.

Rail development should “integrate and connect high-speed and intercity passenger rail corridors across the United States with the existing Amtrak network, and with commuter rail and transit operations wherever possible to create a national passenger rail network,” the proposal says. It recommends a dedicated federal revenue

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This has news through December 19.
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Union Pacific

UP’s new twin-span Osage River Bridge, with a parallel road bridge under construction.

source separate from the Highway Trust Fund and indexed to inflation, to pay for planning, design and construction of the high-performance rail network.

A new, double-track 1,200-foot railroad bridge over the Osage River just east of Jefferson City, MO opened on Nov. 27, ahead of schedule and under budget. With the completion of the \$28 million bridge, the Union Pacific-owned route of Amtrak’s St. Louis-Kansas City *Missouri River Runners* is now double track from St. Louis to River Jct., just west of Jefferson City. This adds capacity and improves on-time performance for passenger and freight trains. ■

Planning Work Begins on “Reconstructed” Tacoma Station

A design for a new station at Freight-house Square in Tacoma, WA—to be shared by Amtrak and Sounder commuter trains—was unveiled on Dec. 9. The Washington State Dept. of Transportation (WSDOT) plans to reconstruct an existing wood building, a former Milwaukee Road freight building, to make a new passenger station.

The reconfiguration of Tacoma’s station location is part of WSDOT’s Port Defiance Bypass project. The design calls for Amtrak trains to turn south at Tacoma and pass through Lakewood (currently served by Sounder) and Fort Lewis before rejoining the existing line at Nisqually, rather than hugging Puget Sound (to the northwest from Tacoma, then south) as they currently do. The bypass is expected to be operational in 2017.

WSDOT’s design work on the Freighthouse Square station is less than 15% complete. It will provide full service for the state-supported Amtrak *Cascades* Talgo trains and Amtrak’s *Coast Starlight*, which uses Superliners. This determines the square footage of the reconstructed building.

The Tacoma community feared the initial design would cause the *Starlight* to block two city streets during its stops. They also wanted no additional parking lot or large parking structure built. Amtrak agreed with WSDOT’s assessment that existing parking would be adequate, and has confirmed that the track configuration around the station would serve the *Starlight* as well.

WSDOT is moving forward with changes that will put the passenger platform on the original Milwaukee Road trestle to the station’s north, now owned by Sound Transit. This is “not a done deal,” WSDOT says.

New Montana *Builder* Stop In the Works

The Bakken oil shale boom in western North Dakota and eastern Montana means greater numbers are using the *Empire Builder* to get to and from places where there are lucrative jobs. It has also spurred civic leaders in Culbertson, MT—a town along the *Builder’s* route between Wolf Point, MT and Williston, ND—to begin planning for the construction of a new station there, with the

A major concern of passenger advocates is that the boarding platform only serves one track, despite that Sounder trains run frequently throughout the day and often lay over at the Tacoma station, and that Amtrak service frequency is expected to grow. However, the planned station’s location—at an existing, multi-modal travel hub and convenient to downtown—practically prevents it from being served by two through tracks, though the future Amtrak route is double-tracked to the north and south of the site.

The initial architect’s renderings unveiled Dec. 9 caused many to complain about the building’s “uninspired” design. Other complaints, such as that columns inside the building are spaced too close together to allow Amtrak to maneuver its baggage handling equipment, would only apply if the existing building were used without significant structural changes. Instead, it will be completely rebuilt.

“I think a logical option would be to use the space that they have designated, but make the exterior design be consistent with the rest of the former Milwaukee Road freight depot,” said Ronald Sheck, a WSDOT retiree who is active in All Aboard Washington. “One big advantage of this site is that it is served by Tacoma Link, Greyhound, Sound Transit and Pierce Transit buses as well as Sounder commuter trains and offers travelers many food options.” ■

Landslide Problems Subside

The landslides that have wreaked havoc on Amtrak, Sounder commuter trains and BNSF freight trains in Washington state in recent winter rainy seasons have not occurred so far this year. Partial credit may be due to drier weather, but BNSF’s work to contain slide-prone hillsides, some of which was done with federal funding, is starting to pay dividends. Problem areas are along Puget Sound north of Seattle towards Edmonds, as well as south of Tacoma.

Hillsides were shored up with federal funding this past summer in two locations, both between Edmonds and Everett. One more will be worked on next year. BNSF is doing additional work at other spots with its own funds. The Washington State Dept. of Transportation is educating landowners on what they can do to make slopes on their property more stable.

Because of BNSF policy, any amount of mud on the tracks forces a 48-hour suspension of passenger service. However, freight trains and non-revenue passenger equipment moves usually proceed within a few hours. ■



Courtesy Washington State Dept. of Transportation

BNSF is building a wall to hold back a slide-prone hillside at milepost 29.5 between Everett and Edmonds.

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done for the *California Zephyr* a few years ago when its performance was horrible.

There is no truth to the rumor that BNSF forced the mid-December *Builder* annulments to let its UPS trains run without delay. ■

Cincinnati Streetcar Victory!

NARP has helped advocates of a project to build a 3.6-mile downtown streetcar loop in Cincinnati, returning streetcars to the city for the first time since the early 1960s. The federally-funded project, on which construction

NARP Council Rep. Defends Southwest Chief in Column N.M. member writes passionately about Chief in letter to the editor

“If the *Southwest Chief* is eliminated it would be because money is spent elsewhere, and/or Congress is starving Amtrak while it bails out the Highway Trust Fund. Either way, we’re not getting our fair share. It’s time to set the record straight.”



Fischer Stout

So writes NARP Council Representative and Northern Flyer Alliance President Deborah Fischer Stout in a Dec. 10 column for the *Kansas City Star*. If Kansas City is serious about competing economically with St. Louis, which is benefitting from rail investment, it must get serious about preserving the threatened part of the *Chief’s* route (see May 2013 *News*), Fischer Stout insists.

“Connecting cities by passenger rail will promote economic development and create high quality jobs,” she writes. “Study after study shows that investment in rail infrastructure increases GDP output.”

NARP member Inez A. Ross of Los Alamos, NM also wrote a passionate plea to citizens to come to the *Chief’s* defense, published as a letter to the editor in the Nov. 26 *Los Alamos Daily Post*. “We can’t afford to lose this necessary, beautiful, and historic rail line,” she writes. “We can start with bake sales, but funding depends on action from the State and National Congress. Contact them ASAP and forward this news to anyone whom we need to inform.”

You can also write a letter or column for your local newspaper calling for greater passenger train investment. Use the facts found at www.narprail.org to back up your case. ■

has already begun and vehicles built, was threatened with cancellation by the newly elected Mayor, John Cranley (R), and the new Republican majority on the City Council.

The Council voted 5-4 to pause construction on Dec. 4, saying they wanted one of the parties involved to commit to covering ongoing operating costs. On Dec. 17, the Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority (SORTA) said it would assume the operating costs for at least 25 years (\$80 million).

NARP, Amtrak Thank Indiana

already talking with Amtrak about offering similar special café cars over the Christmas and New Year’s holidays.

The concerted efforts of NARP, MHSRA and Hoosiers for Passenger Rail that pressed Gov. Mike Pence to support the train included:

- organizing media events at the Indianapolis station and rallies at the statehouse to draw attention to the threat to the train,
- bringing on board local elected leaders and Chambers of Commerce along with student organizations (see last issue), and
- collaborating with the employees at Amtrak’s Beech Grove Shops and the unions that represent them.

Gov. Pence dedicated the \$3 million needed to keep the Hoosier Staterunning through at least the end of 2014.

But the fight to improve service between Chicago and Indianapolis, and

Vice Mayor David Mann, considered the “swing” vote on the Council, called SORTA’s announcement a “game changer” and said he would now likely support the project.

NARP has urged supporters to join local advocates in calling on city leaders to let the project move forward, via our blog, email, Facebook and Twitter.

You can still make your support known to Mayor Cranley at mayor.cranley@cincinnati-oh.gov or (513) 352-3250. ■

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eventually Cincinnati, has just begun. We will have to convince Gov. Pence and legislators to appropriate sufficient funds to not only continue service beyond next year, but also to improve it. Tracks and signals must be fixed up and additional equipment acquired to provide a faster, more reliable service at more attractive hours.

Events like “Thank You Indiana” are important to sustain public awareness of and involvement in the cause, and to cement partnerships among the state of Indiana, local communities, passengers and Amtrak.

NARP looks forward to continuing to work with Hoosiers for Passenger Rail to make the Chicago-Indianapolis corridor into one that citizens can be proud of, that will draw even more riders, and bring more business to the downtowns along the route. ■

10th ANNUAL SOUTHWESTERN RAIL CONFERENCE

NARP MEMBERS SAVE HALF ON REGISTRATION

Register today for the premiere event bringing together industry leaders and advocates from passenger and freight rail from across the Southwest.

Taking place Jan. 24 at the Holiday Inn SMU/Park Cities in Dallas, TX, the conference will feature representatives of the Texas & Oklahoma Depts. of Transportation, Texas Central High Speed Railway, BNSF, Union Pacific, Kansas City Southern Railway, and others, plus NARP Chairman Bob Stewart.

NARP members can register for the Friday, Jan. 24 conference for \$75.00—half off the regular rate! To



register at this rate, go to www.texas-railadvocates.org/c/NARP.html or call Taylor Sharpe at (214) 522-5525.

More information at www.texas-railadvocates.org/conference. You may also register there separately for the Thursday, Jan. 23 dinner featuring special guest Ignacio Barron de Angoit, Director of the Passenger and High Speed Department of the International Union of Railways in Paris, France.

Progress Made towards Vermont Reroute in western Massachusetts

Amtrak's *Vermont* is expected to get a faster, more direct Springfield, MA-Brattleboro, VT route—via Northampton and Greenfield (instead of Amherst) in early 2015. Work on track and stations is planned to finish by the end of 2014.

The reroute is 11 miles shorter and saves time, partly by avoiding a reverse move at Palmer, MA. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is negotiating to purchase 49 miles of track from Springfield to Northfield from Pan Am Railways, for an expected \$17 million, and repair it with \$73 million in federal High Speed and Intercity Passenger Rail funds.

Rail, ties and other equipment have been procured. Work has been completed as far south as Greenfield, with the rest of the way to Springfield to be done by June or July. New signal equipment is planned for 24 rail/highway grade crossings. Greenfield's John W. Olver Transit Center will have a passenger platform.

Shuttle bus service is planned to connect Amherst and Easthampton to the train at Northampton, said state Sen. Stanley Rosenberg (D-Amherst).

The States of Connecticut, Massachusetts and Vermont are jointly studying options for increasing service levels on the new route via Greenfield, including extending one or more New Haven-Springfield *Shuttles* farther north—to Greenfield or even into Vermont. This would help ease traffic congestion on parallel Interstate 91. The equipment currently idles at Springfield.

"[In Europe,] you can get from place to place hopping on the train, and they're efficient and comfortable and reasonably priced," Sen. Rosenberg told the *Greenfield Recorder*. "I would love to create that here in Massachusetts, so that you can connect through trains. It will take time." ■

MARC Weekend Service a Big Hit

With funding approved by the Maryland legislature earlier in the year, the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) began its first-ever weekend MARC commuter train service.

This is on the Washington-Baltimore Penn Station "Penn Line" which now has nine Saturday and six Sunday round-trips; three extend east to Martin Airport.

Service began Saturday, December 7, with 2,400 passengers. An unexpectedly high number of 1,300 passengers rode on Sunday, Dec. 8, despite snow and freezing temperatures.

No additional equipment or track capacity was needed, just new conductors and engineers and a revised operating agreement with Amtrak, which owns the line and operates the trains. Weekend trains are currently three cars long, compared with six to eight cars on weekdays. Additional capacity can easily be added.

MTA Administrator Robert L. Smith

CALIFORNIA HIGH SPEED RAIL PROGRESS

Bakersfield-Fresno Route Approved; Eminent Domain Granted

The California High Speed Rail Authority Board of Directors on Nov. 7 unanimously approved a route for a dedicated track to carry 220-mph trains with no grade crossings between Fresno and Bakersfield, including through downtown Bakersfield. Board Chairman Dan Richard, however, emphasized that the alignment is not final. The land will have to be acquired by the state before construction can begin.

Farmers in Shafter and Wasco greeted the routing with approval, but Bakersfield officials and residents expressed concern with disruption and land takings in and near downtown.

Then, on Dec. 13, the State Public Works Board granted approval for the Authority to start the process of seizing its first piece of property through eminent domain. The 3-0 vote allows a 2.5-acre parcel in Fresno to be taken so an underground trench for HSR can be built. The Authority had reached an



NARP Director Jim Churchill

MP36PH-3C diesel locomotive #15 prepares to pull the first Saturday MARC train from Washington Union Station to Baltimore on Dec. 7.

said "all of us were rather pleasantly surprised" with the Dec. 7 patronage. He said it will take three to six months to get a good gauge on the level of interest in weekend service. He expects spring and summer events to draw more riders.

"We believe there's buy-in for it from both the Baltimore and Washington markets," Smith told *Mass Transit Magazine*. "Right now we're really happy with the buzz that's out there." ■

impasse with the property owner. The parcel was pegged as critical to acquire early due to the complicated construction required there.

The Authority anticipates starting construction on the initial 29-mile Madera-Fresno segment this year. It called for contractors to submit their qualifications to bid on the next 60-mile phase from Fresno to the Tulare/Kern County line near Bakersfield on Oct. 10. The entire Madera-Bakersfield line will operate by 2022, the Authority maintains. ■

CLARIFICATION

Tri-Rail commuter trains will start serving the Miami Intermodal Center (Dec., 2013, *News*, p. 3) in April 2014, but Amtrak will wait until the run-around road is finished in 2016 before moving its operations to the MIC from its current terminal near Hialeah.

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OUR MISSION: A MODERN, CUSTOMER-FOCUSED NATIONAL PASSENGER TRAIN NETWORK THAT PROVIDES A TRAVEL CHOICE AMERICANS WANT.

MEMBERS' CORNER

THANK YOU

In 2013, Your Contributions Made the Difference

Thank you for being a part of something that benefits millions of Americans. NARP congratulates all of its members for a job well done. Your momentum will carry over into 2014 and NARP will continue to have success through your dedication to preserving and expanding America's passenger rail system. America's future passengers will have you to thank.

— The Leadership and Staff of NARP

Amtrak Reroute Through Springfield, IL Questioned

As part of the "high[er] speed rail" plan for the Chicago-St. Louis corridor, the Illinois Dept. of Transportation and the City of Springfield have undertaken a project, with the help of federal and private railroad funds, to move Amtrak and Union Pacific trains off the existing Third Street corridor and onto the Tenth Street corridor.

Many train advocates are urging that the Third Street route be preserved, arguing the reroute is being done more to benefit drivers on streets frequently blocked by trains than to benefit train passengers.

Former NARP Asst. Dir. Barry Wil-

liams, a St. Louis resident who has ridden trains between there and Chicago for many years, expressed these concerns in a letter the *State Journal-Register* (Springfield) published Dec. 13. Here is part of that letter:

"It defies logic that a city would seek to move its Amtrak trains from such a perfect site—just as years of work and millions of dollars are about to transform these trains into some of the best in the nation—and at such a high cost," Williams writes. "The project's benefits would be strictly local and would come at the expense of travelers, including the many Illinoisans who travel to their

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Crescent will not run Atlanta-New Orleans Mondays-Thursdays Jan. 6-9 and Jan. 20-Feb. 6. This means Sun.-Wed. New York departures. It is due to Norfolk Southern's annual trackwork program. No alternate transportation between Atlanta & New Orleans those days.

New no-show policy effective Mar. 1, 2014: If you make a reservation at a "Saver" or "Value" fare for coach or *Acela* Business Class travel, and you do not modify it prior to departure and do not board the first departure on the reservation ("no show"), you forfeit the entire amount paid—no refund or eVoucher will be issued. This applies to Amtrak Guest Rewards point redemption reservations also. Refundable or "Flexible" fares are refundable even if you "no show," as are non-*Acela* Business and *Acela* First Class fares.

state capital each year for business or pleasure. ... The station at Third Street is a precious asset to train riders, who can easily walk to the Capitol, other state government buildings, hotels, museums, etc."

Construction on the project is expected to start in 2014, with completion anticipated in 2015 or 2016. More information at www.springfieldrailroad.com or (217) 747-9257. ■