

Funding Still Not Settled

The House Appropriations Committee, on a 35-25 party-line vote, on September 26, killed a Democratic amendment raising from \$762 million to \$1.2 billion Amtrak's 2003 funding level in the committee's bill. The committee passed the bill, H.R.5559, on October 1.

Despite committee's vote, optimism remains that Amtrak could get \$1.2 billion. Stressing that level's importance, and the dilemma it presents, Amtrak President David Gunn said on public radio (see box, right) \$1.2 billion "doesn't pay for essential activities that should be undertaken on rolling stock and on the Northeast Corridor" and the need for the "short-run for the existing system is something approaching \$1.5 billion."

So far, continuing resolutions have funded Amtrak based on an annual rate of \$1.04 billion—the sum of 2002's appropriation of \$521 million, the \$205 million supplemental during 2002, and \$312 million (60% of the 2001 appropriation; cash that Amtrak actually got in 2002).

In early October, it seemed that Congress—before adjourning around October 18—would pass a continuing resolution good through early December. If the elections produce big changes, major decisions might be postponed to February, with continuing resolutions running until then. If control of the House and Senate does not change, there could be a December "omnibus" spending bill good for the rest of fiscal 2003.

The committee also approved an unworkable \$150 million cap on operating grants for long-distance trains. This was developed to replace a cap based on subsidy-per-passenger which would have targeted specific trains, and thus generated considerable opposition.

In a letter to the subcommittee (see our web site), NARP said subsidy-per-passenger does not measure economic efficiency, noting that in 2001 the Chicago-Los Angeles *Southwest Chief* had the fifth-best operating ratio (costs divided by revenues), but the fifth-worst subsidy-per-passenger among long-distance trains.

Subcommittee Ranking Democrat Martin Olav Sabo (D.-Minn.), author of the pro-Amtrak amendment, said its failure

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GUNN ON HIS TERM OF SERVICE

Diane Rehm (on her public radio talk show, October 3): You came out of retirement to take this job. What's your long-term commitment here?

Amtrak President David Gunn: First of all it's good Lord willing—I am 65...but, assuming I have control of the situation, I think that a situation like this—and I've been in them before—you have to make at least a four-to-five year commitment. And as long as my health and energy hold up, that's what I'll do. Unless they....

Rehm: They could pull you—they could pull the railroad.

Gunn: They can send me back to Nova Scotia.

Modernizing On-Board Sales

We reported, in earlier newsletters (Dec. '98, Oct. '99), on Amtrak's efforts to put "point of sale" (POS) machines in all food service cars. These machines would:

- Minimize late openings and early closings of food service, by eliminating much of the paperwork and inventory work employees must do;

- Give Amtrak managers complete information about what items sold and when—"within hours after a train reaches its destination (rather than 30 days later, as at present)";

- Reduce instances of running out of menu items, as well as spoilage;

- Improve food revenues, customer satisfaction and crew morale.

These machines now are available on all California corridor trains.

We also discussed a system called EATEC that would be "less obvious to customers but would reduce paperwork and otherwise streamline Amtrak's food purchasing process." EATEC is an inventory control system that helps cut costs

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—Colorado Railcar

MODERN DIESEL CAR HITS THE ROAD

After successful testing at Transportation Technology Center, Pueblo, Colo., in August, builder Colorado Railcar took its prototype, self-propelled, diesel-multiple unit (DMU) car on a fall tour.

Stops on the tour were to include Denver (at left), Las Vegas (American Public Transportation Association meeting), Washington (Rail-Volution, *Railway Age* conferences), Newark, Orlando, Charlotte, Chicago, Madison, Portland, Vancouver. A spring tour is planned.

Colorado Railcar has built cars for 15 years, including for operation on the Alaska Railroad. The new DMU meets current safety standards and can be built in several configurations.

The DMU—which can pull two non-powered trailer cars at up to 90 mph—could fill a niche in commuter and short-haul intercity corridors, where no successful self-propelled equipment has been manufactured for the U.S. market in about 50 years.

General Funds for Aviation to Rise

Money for Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Operations comes both from the air trust fund (“user fees”) and general funds. The Airport Improvement

Program, Facilities and Equipment (weather forecasting; radar) and research are covered by the trust fund. Then, each year, remaining trust fund revenues go to

FAA Operations. If revenues decline sharply, the general taxpayer contribution to Operations rises.

The 2003 numbers in the graph (below, right) are from President Bush’s budget request, and reflect a \$2.6 billion increase in general taxpayer support of FAA Operations, while the “general” share rises from 15% in 2002 (roughly covering costs attributable to military and other government aircraft) to 49% in 2003. ■

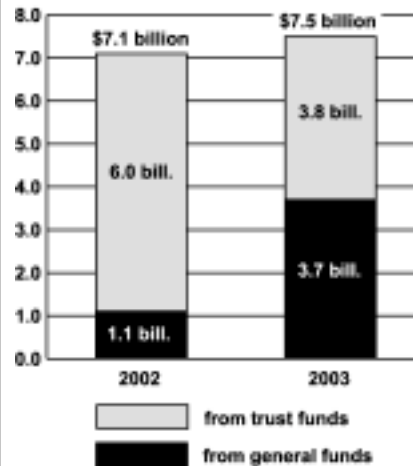
AVIATION LESS ATTRACTIVE

“...Surveys of recent patterns of business travelers, who are the airlines’—and airports’—best customers, have shown a marked trend toward avoiding commercial airports when possible. Among the ramifications of this are sharply increased use of trains and automobiles for shorter business trips...

“[New baggage-handling systems, due December 31] when operating at their best handle 179 bags an hour and routinely reject almost one-third of those bags. A flagged bag means someone has to inspect it by hand...”

—“On the Road” column, Joe Sharkey, New York Times, June 11

FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION OPERATIONS
Funding Sources, 2002-2003



Amtrak Ends Unconditional Guarantee

Amtrak’s unconditional service guarantee—which began July 4, 2000—ends effective November 1. Promotion of the guarantee ended October 4.

Amtrak advised its employees, “nonetheless, customer satisfaction will remain an absolute priority at Amtrak, and all of the remaining elements of the service success initiative, including standard service recovery practices, will remain in effect.”

In cases of exceptional inconvenience, transportation certificates and even—on occasion—refunds still will be issued; management is encouraging employees to use common sense.

Amtrak President David L. Gunn felt that the unconditional guarantee made no sense, since Amtrak lacks control over freight railroad dispatchers, and heavy overhauls have been deferred for over two years. (This does not indicate a safety problem. Likewise, things like worn carpets notwithstanding, employees on the train are expected to continue to do their best to serve passengers.)

Management will lose some of the immediacy in reporting which had been based on next-day availability in the company’s intranet of details on guarantee credits issued. However, Gunn is reinstating the Passenger Satisfaction Index, a comprehensive survey-based polling of passenger attitudes and opinions on service.

The unconditional guarantee expanded upon a successful program begun on the *Coast Starlight* in 1996 that excluded lateness and mechanical problems. Gunn believes retrenching from the unconditional guarantee to what was done on the *Coast Starlight* would be too difficult. ■

TRAINS’ CULTURAL, PATRIOTIC VALUE

Joe Beck, of the *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, wrote a July 7 column, “Give Passenger Trains a Fair Chance.” He lists reasons why “the refusal of Congress and a long line of presidents to make a full-fledged commitment to passenger rail has never made less sense than it does” now. His list includes terrorism, gridlock, aging of the population, and “patriotism and education.”

Of the latter, he writes, “Those who consider travel by passenger train nothing more than a nostalgic exercise may as well say the same about efforts to preserve Civil War battlefields, national parks and other historic sites. These places—and traveling by train—make me feel bound to the land, its history and its people, far more so than listening to some face-lifted performer on television singing one more rendition of...‘God Bless America.’

“Different people experience patriotism in different ways. Cross-country passenger train travel is one of the most meaningful ways I can think of for people to reconnect with the national spirit, especially if their style of patriotism runs more

toward the reflective than the overwrought.”

Another commentary in that vein was from the July 8 *Bakersfield Californian*, by David Lampe, who wrote, “...In light of the continuing terrorist threat, we cannot afford to increase crowding at our airports, adding additional costs, stresses and concentration on top of that system...”

“I remind my fellow Republicans that this is the very heartland that consistently supports Republican candidates and the national Republican agenda.

“This past summer, my wife and I took our teen-age sons across the country on Amtrak, allowing them to see the whole of this nation without skipping from airport to airport and missing ‘all that flat land’ in between. This gave them an important national perspective when they were confronted with the horror of Sept. 11.

“Support of passenger rail, including some level of subsidy in the near future, is, in my opinion, a patriotic duty.”

DIRECT ROUTE FOR TEXAS EAGLE?



Amtrak's *Texas Eagle* could be faster and more efficient using Trinity Railway Express' (TRE) Fort Worth-Dallas route.

To let TRE commuter trains go directly between Fort Worth's beautiful, new intermodal terminal ("ITC") and Dallas without backing up, a connection was

built that links the ITC with TRE's ex-Rock Island mainline to Dallas.

TRE trains (eastbound example) start at Fort Worth's old T&P Station, head east to the ITC, then run on the new connection through the historic Alarm Supply Building (left) and under BNSF's mainline to Oklahoma. The photo at right shows connection as seen from BNSF (looking east from Amtrak's *Heartland Flyer*).

But when the eastbound *Eagle* is ready to leave the ITC, it must wait (sometimes many minutes) for clearance from Union Pacific to back south across the congested rail/rail crossing at Tower 55, then wait again for permission to head east on the UP.

On July 2, for example, the *Eagle's* Fort Worth-Dallas running time—with no intermediate stops—was 65 minutes plus

several minutes awaiting permission for the initial move. TRE's total ITC-to-Dallas time, by contrast, is 65 minutes with six intermediate stops.

Clearly, the *Eagle* is slower and its reliability worse because it must pass the very busy Tower 55 three times instead of once.



—Ross B. Capon (both)

On-Board Sales (from page 1)

by enabling Amtrak to more accurately monitor daily food usage. Gategourmet, the private commissary operator with which Amtrak contracts, uses EATEC.

To gain full advantage of POS,

however, it must link accurately with EATEC. This link eliminates time Amtrak on-board employees spend on paperwork (inventory). When the systems were tested on the *Vermonteer*, significant problems were uncovered, and the test ended.

Subsequently, Amtrak determined that

POS could operate independently of EATEC. This was successful, and POS and EATEC now are linked in California.

Systemwide implementation awaits funding for hardware purchases, adjustments to equipment, relevant employee training and development of an infrastructure to support the system.

The inordinately long time it is taking to get this system from inception to operation is partly attributable to problems with a vendor that went bankrupt.

On-Board Ticket Sales

California officials now are pressing for widespread implementation of another device (common in Europe for years)—a hand-held ticket reader/issuer for conductors, that will facilitate on-board ticket sales and (like the point-of-sale system) help insure that Amtrak actually gets all the revenue to which it is entitled. (The September 2001 report of the Amtrak Inspector General notes, for example, that an audit of 15 conductors and assistant conductors assigned to the Albany, N.Y., crewbase "revealed various amounts of unremitted cash, credit cards, and checks that total approximately \$165,000 owed to Amtrak.")

Taken together, the two devices should make it much easier to use credit cards for food and ticket purchases and to work the exchange rate for Canadian currency. Also, conductors will be able to quote fares more quickly and more reliably.

This device also is a long time coming (Mar. '95, Aug. '99, Oct. '99 News). ■

TRAV BURGESS

Ex-NARP director F. Travers ("Trav") Burgess, of Kirkwood, Mo., died September 7, age 82. He served 1977-86 (at-large) and 1994-98 (representing Region 9).

Burgess earned a law degree from Washington University ('41) in St. Louis, then served in the Army during World War II, attaining the rank of captain. He later worked as a patent attorney at a rail supply

company, with expertise in underframes and trucks, knowledge that helped NARP when he served on its board.

He was in the middle of the unsuccessful fight to save St. Louis' streetcar network (which was gone by 1966), as well as a later, successful effort to introduce light-rail service, and in the ongoing effort to get a permanent rail station.

MAINE SUPPORTS "FLEXIBILITY"

TEA-21—the federal surface transportation law that authorizes highway and transit programs—will be renewed next year. It is important that federal law, for the first time, recognize passenger rail as a form of surface transportation that merits federal investment.

In making that point, Maine Transportation Commissioner John G. Melrose wrote to NARP recently:

"The Maine Department of Transportation is using Congestion Mitigation-Air Quality (CMAQ) funds to

restore passenger rail service in Maine. The funding flexibility permitted through this program has allowed us to make infrastructure investments that will benefit both passenger and freight rail service in Maine for many years to come. We support the continuation of the CMAQ program in the upcoming reauthorization of TEA-21, and believe that states should be given further flexibility to invest in alternatives that serve corridors within the National Highway System."

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

October 27/28 schedule changes (see also September News)—Acela Express New York-Boston service is restored to 9 weekday trains each way (as in August 3 timetable). New York-Washington has 12 Acela Express and 6 Metroliner trips each way, weekdays.

The *Carolinian* leaves New York at 6:35 am (0:30 later, at the request of North Carolina, which helps support the train). Connections *Pennsylvanian*, *Cardinal* still provided.

Due to state-funded track/signal work, *Carolinian* is 0:09-0:20 faster west of Selma, *Piedmont* is 0:12-0:13 faster west of Raleigh. More time will be taken away in the spring.

Southbound *Ethan Allen* runs about 4:00 earlier Monday-Saturday (leave Rutland 9:10 am).

Southbound *Vermont* runs about 1:30 earlier Monday-Friday (leave St. Albans 6:35 am; connecting bus leave Montreal at 4:05 am!).

[Last issue, we should have said the Friday-only 4:25 pm New York-Syracuse train still will go to Albany.]

A 10th weekday Oakland-Sacramento Capitol Corridor round-trip is added—depart Oakland 5:25 am; Sacramento 6:40 pm.

A Chicago-Milwaukee *Hiawatha* round-trip is added; early morning northbound and evening south.

Stations—These stations have regained checked baggage service—

Meridian, Miss.; Tampa, Fla.; Sebring, Fla. (*Silver Meteor* and *Silver Star* only); St. Petersburg-Pinellas Park, Fla. (bus only).

Food Service—At Caltrans' request, as an economy move, Amtrak will end table service in *San Joaquin* food-service cars October 4-6. The lounge menu is still available. Tray meals that can be taken to tables in that car, or back to passengers' seats, will be offered instead, starting October 27.

Vermont—All remaining staffed stations lost their Amtrak agents effective September 27 on both routes: *Ethan Allen* (Rutland) and *Vermont* (St. Albans, Essex Junction, White River Junction).

2003 Funding

(from page 1)

would mean Amtrak will be back asking for more money in a few months, at which point "we would be just as much at fault." Rep. Sam Farr (D.-Cal.) said the committee was able to spend three hours debating Amtrak because "we know more about this subsidy than any other subsidy we provide."

Both the Amtrak vote and a party-line vote October 1 against a Democratic amendment to raise highway spending \$4.1 billion (to the 2002 level) perhaps were more about partisan politics than lawmakers' views on trains and roads. If Congress does an "omnibus" bill, the committee's DOT bill may not even go to the House floor. ■



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