



Kummant Testifies, Defends National System Sees “Challenges with peeling anything [like the NEC] off”

“I have always wondered why the Amtrak debate is so emotional and at times acrimonious. It really needn’t be, especially now. At a time of high oil prices, growing highway and airport congestion and record rail freight volumes...we should be embracing rail and developing it as quickly and as responsibly as we can.

“We should get beyond the debate of a few hundred million dollars of operating costs and begin to realize the potential rail passenger service has to offer with the right level of investment and a clearly defined federal policy.”

—Alex Kummant’s prepared statement to House Railroads Subcommittee, Sept. 28

Amtrak President and CEO Alex Kummant:

- believes “long-distance trains are an important part of the nation’s transportation network, and...it is our challenge to run them in the most efficient and effective way. That said, I understand how important these trains are as a form of basic transportation to many small communities across the nation,”

- sees state-sponsored corridor development “between city pairs of 300-500 miles [as] a major part and the driving force of our future,” and

- said “the only mandate I have been



Alex Kummant

given by the board is to run a safe and reliable railroad.”

Kummant was the sole witness before the Subcommittee on Railroads of the House Committee on Transportation and

Infrastructure in a September 28 hearing, just 12 business days after he began work.

Chairman Steve LaTourette (R-OH) asked about on-time performance and track capacity problems. Kummant responded: “In the end, the answer has to be capital [investment]... We need to sit down with the freights [freight railroads] and ask them to come up with a plan. But we do have contracts, and we have to hold them to those contracts.”

Break Up Amtrak?

Rep. Corinne Brown (D-FL), ranking subcommittee member, called Kummant “a bright spot in this administration and Amtrak” and said, “I am looking for very positive things.”

She also said: “The Bush Administration tried to destroy the railroad from within, by splitting off the Northeast Corridor... I’m glad the board has backed off on those efforts for now.”

Rep. John Mica (R-FL), however, has not backed off. His intense, continuing interest in breaking up Amtrak by splitting off the Northeast Corridor (NEC) may indicate a similar, if recently unstated, Bush Administration interest.

Mica called for “separating out the Northeast Corridor...[to] give the private sector an opportunity to help and expand service... Next time I see you [Kummant], I’ll ask if you’ve met with” interested private sector representatives.

Mica asked if Kummant was open to the NEC having private sector funding. Kummant said he was willing to look at such options, but cited “tremendous operating challenges with peeling anything off.”

Mica chairs the aviation subcommittee and never misses a chance to criticize Amtrak. Both when chairing his own Sept. 27 hearing on aviation finance and at Kummant’s hearing, Mica called Amtrak “a Soviet-style railroad.”

U.S. Secretary of Transportation Mary Peters

Early on September 30, the Senate (on its last pre-election day in session) confirmed Mary Peters to head the Department of Transportation. She succeeds Norman Mineta, who resigned in June. Peters got a friendly reception at her Sept. 20 confirmation hearing before the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation. The Committee reported her nomination on a unanimous 22-0 vote on Sept. 25.

Answering a question from Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ), she said “I...agree we need a national rail passenger system.” Sen. Conrad Burns (R-MT) urged Peters to put some people at the Department of Transportation who understand that Amtrak must be in the overall transpor-

tation mix. “They say no one rides the train. I say, ‘Just try getting a reservation on the *Empire Builder*.’”

NARP Pres. George Chilson, a former Arizona resident, applauded Peters’ nomination in a Sept. 8 statement: “I

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Reauthorization Update

S.1516, the bipartisan rail passenger reauthorization, did not reach the Senate floor in September. Tell your Senators that it’s long overdue and to push for floor time during the November session.

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In Memory: Linda Stangohr Park Verdi

Top management, board members, and legislators with different ideas about passenger rail come and go. In this shifting environment, Amtrak functions as smoothly as it does due in no small part to the hard work of a cadre of faithful, long-serving, mid-level managers. One such employee, 33-year veteran Linda Park Verdi, died unexpectedly on June 8.

She was a wonderful, energetic person who cared deeply about making the passenger experience the best it could be, and also about acquainting young people with passenger rail. Her work touched countless train riders who have not heard of her. She won three Amtrak President's Awards.

She instigated Amtrak's partnership with Student Advantage, whose members still enjoy a 15% discount on most Amtrak rail fares.

As I wrote on the NARP blog in June, Linda was deeply involved in joint marketing efforts with VIA Rail Canada. She went to Montreal many times to meet with VIA and develop new programs. The most significant outcome was the North America Rail Pass which gives passengers unlimited travel on both Amtrak and VIA Rail Canada for a 30-day period.

Earlier, she managed the marketing for the start-up of the Amtrak *Auto Train*, which was October 30, 1983. (The private Auto Train Corporation ran the service until May 1, 1981.)

She also was involved in upgrading the Superliner trains, including movies and on

board guides.

From the mid-1990s until April, 2002, she oversaw the annual improvement of Amtrak's Travel Planner. Now called Amtrak America, the booklet provides extensive information about traveling on



—Ira Silverman, Former Amtrak Director of Route Marketing
(photo and caption)

Linda as we would like to remember her: sipping some wine on TGV Atlantique, circa 1990

Amtrak, including accommodations and routes. She initiated a joint marketing effort involving publication of Thomas the Tank Engine books with extra, outer pages promoting Amtrak to kids.

She also put together Amtrak's sponsor-

ship program with NASCAR driver Rusty Wallace that included Amtrak's logo on his racesuit, and developed Amtrak merchandise items sold to consumers including both brands. There was a photo shoot with Rusty and his race car being loaded onto an Auto Train car carrier. Linda developed the slogan, "Take Amtrak to the Track." Many happy fans did just that.

In recent years, she worked on Amtrak timetables. One of former CEO David Gunn's more visible and widely applauded decisions was to reinstate Amtrak's national timetable, so it was certainly good to have Linda involved in seeing that the product met high standards. She also visited the NARP office on a few occasions to get our thoughts about how the timetable could be improved; some of the additional local transit information is one result of those conversations.

One of her last non-timetable projects is about to come to fruition. She did much of the initial development work on a joint Amtrak/Marvel Comics educational and entertaining program for second through sixth grade students—"edutainment," she called it [see sidebar below].

It is hard to imagine Amtrak without Linda, but she would want all of us—inside and outside the company—to keep working for a great national rail passenger service for the U.S. —**Ross B. Capon**

"Heroes on the Train"

Developed by Marvel Comics exclusively for Amtrak, this comic book will be distributed to 500,000 students in select schools in the Northeast Corridor as a pilot program, during the next few months on Keystone Corridor trains, and around Thanksgiving at the Citigroup model train display in New York City. There is a companion teacher's guide.

The Fantastic Four and the two Richards kids are on vacation on a cross-country train trip. Peter Parker (a.k.a. Spider-Man) has been hired to write about the famous family's trip.

Franklin, the little boy in the story, does not want to leave their home in New York City because Spider-Man, whom he is dying to meet, is supposed to be in NYC. Franklin is bored and the fun begins. Mom uses her remarkable powers to show a cross section of the

train experience and the opportunity to see what the members of the Amtrak team (the Amtrak Super Squad) are doing to help passengers.

The adults relay their exciting adventures with Spider-Man in different Amtrak cities around the country, and how they ended their adventure each time with a fun trip home on Amtrak.

Finally, The Thing (Ben Grimm, one of the Fantastic Four) spins his tale of adventure with Spider-Man, playing down Spider-Man's role. By this time Peter Parker (Spider-Man), who is sitting in front of the family on the train, has had enough. He changes into Spider-Man, thrills Franklin and replies that he too wanted to take Amtrak, to relax and see the country in style.

Franklin loves the train and all ends well!

Peters

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had the pleasure of working with her when she was director of the Arizona Department of Transportation...

"I believe she understands that rail will become an increasingly important component of our transportation system as we confront...intractable congestion and rising oil prices. Rail represents a strategic solution that will help preserve America's mobility, quality of life and competitive position in a global economy as we adapt to new realities..."

"If Mrs. Peters succeeds in finding ways that incorporate rail within the scope of federal transportation policy and planning—as I believe she will—her appointment will prove to be a transforming event that will serve the American people well for generations to come." (See also September News, front page.) ■

Amtrak's Diner-Lounge Program Advances

Part of Amtrak's effort to improve the economic performance of long-distance trains involves creating diner-lounges, aimed at:

- Enabling replacement of separate dining and lounge cars on many trains with a single diner-lounge;
- Supporting Amtrak's goal of offering any meal at any time of day (in general, 6 AM to 11 PM);
- Improved compatibility with meals introduced on most dining cars over the past

nine months which involve more off-train preparation (the so-called "common platform" used by many chain restaurants).

When we first reported this (December 2005 *News* lead story), we said "Superliner diner-lounges will be based on existing Sightseer Lounges, although peak seasons will find two diner-lounges on the biggest trains, the second based on the existing Superliner Diner." Amtrak has not decided which or how many trains will need (or have) two diner-lounges.

Also, our December report said diner-based diner-lounges based would appear before Sightseer-based diner-lounges. Thus, for an interim period—but possibly indefinitely in some cases—some trains will have just the diner-based diner-lounge and no Sightseer car of any kind.

The conversions are planned to alternate dining and lounge tables, and thus will not be divided into "diner" and "lounge" areas. NARP has expressed concern to Amtrak about some design aspects of the planned cars, especially the size and shape of the upstairs tables on which meals will be served, and the seats. We questioned whether they provide enough room for four meals and four people, particularly if the people are strangers or have ample frames.

Amtrak plans to run one diner-based prototype diner-lounge on the *Capitol Limited* for 60 days starting around Nov. 15 before converting 17 more such cars. During the 60 days, necessary adjustments will be identified. Amtrak also indicated that the seats about which NARP expressed concern represent less than 5% of the total cost of conversion materials.

Conversion of 40 Sightseer Superliner lounges—more attractive because of their wraparound windows—will be contracted out to the private sector. The intent is to let the contract in the spring of 2007, allowing possible final design adjustments based on what was learned with the diner-based conversion.

Plans for single-level trains, still tentative, include maintaining traditional service with Amfleet lounge and Heritage diners on *Lake Shore Limited* and *Silver Meteor*. Other single-level trains may have just one converted Amfleet Dinette/Lounge car. These cars, like the Superliner diner-lounges, will serve all meals around the clock. The conversion also means a better car and improved service on the *Cardinal*, which has run for some years with a makeshift diner-lounge and limited food storage space. ■

Amtrak Steps Up "Special Service" Focus

Amtrak in September introduced large, green "Keep in Sight" seat checks to make obvious to train crews which passengers need special attention. This is the latest in a series of ideas recommended by the Amtrak Customer Advisory Committee (ACAC) to help improve Amtrak service to those with special needs.

Special services include things like wheelchairs at stations, meals brought to seats, special-diet meals, and assistance for passengers who need other help (e.g., ambulatory but blind or with limited strength due to recovering from surgery).

ACAC also encouraged the updating of station profiles for reservation agents and a redesign of the train manifest to make special requests more prominent and thus easier for crews to see.

The 23 members of ACAC ride trains often and share their experiences and recommendations with management. Last year alone, the committee collectively logged over 178,000 rail miles. In 2004, the ACAC Disabled and Senior Task Force won an Amtrak President's Service Award (*News*, December, 2004). More on ACAC is at <www.amtrak.com>, click on Inside Amtrak and again on Amtrak Customer Advisory Committee.

Under a contract with Amtrak, NARP has provided administrative support for the ACAC since its inception (*News*, July, 1996).

Kummant

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On a related matter, Rep. Jim Oberstar (D-MN), ranking full committee member, took Mica to task for his incorrect claim that Virgin Rail (U.K.) had made a \$9 billion infrastructure investment while failing to note the British government's huge infrastructure spending and bailout of the bankrupt private infrastructure entity.

Other Issues

Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-OR) questioned Kummant about the status of high-speed rail in the Pacific Northwest. Kummant responded, "There's a lot we can do without (TGV-style) high-speed...Between 80 and 100 miles per hour, we can do a lot."

Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR): "I'm hopeful we'll be able to work with you and a full board, by the next Congress, to be able to realize the potential you describe. In spite of some in Congress, the public favors it too strongly to let it die."

Rep. Lynn Westmoreland (R-GA) complained about unreliability of Virginia Railways Express trains (which Amtrak oper-

On Time Performance Update

New York-Florida and *Coast Starlight* on-time performance improved in Sept. *Silver Meteor* was 67.2% on time at New York or Miami (that is, 39 of 58 trips within 30 minutes of schedule). The southbound *Starlight* reached Los Angeles early five times; over two hours late just six times. Northbound was worse—arrive Portland (end of Union Pacific trackage) over two hours late 10 times during Sept. 13-30.

ates under contract, mostly on CSX and Norfolk Southern tracks). He also said his wife regularly rides Amtrak between Washington and Atlanta and, "When she has complaints, I hear it, not you...some of the cars are old, but there is no excuse for them not to be clean."

Asked by Rep. Leonard Boswell (D-IA) about relations with Amtrak's unions, Kummant said Amtrak needs new labor agreements with "more [work-rule] flexibility in return for higher wages." ■



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TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Fall Timetable Change—Occurs October 30. Major changes:

- More Illinois trains, including two new Chicago-St. Louis round-trips. Chicago departures: 7:00 a.m. (3 stops), 9:15, 2:00 p.m., 5:15, 7:00. St. Louis departures: 4:35 a.m., 6:35, 8:30, 3:10 p.m., 5:30.
- *Texas Eagle*: South, 1:20 earlier (departs Chicago 2 p.m.). North, 60 minutes slower, departs San Antonio one hour earlier (at 7:00 a.m.), but St. Louis departure is unchanged (8:30 a.m.).
- Eastbound *Capitol Limited* runs 90 minutes later (Chicago 7:05 p.m.), for

better connections from Western trains and better time at Pittsburgh, but breaking *Capitol-to-Star* guaranteed connection;

- Westbound *Lake Shore Limited* 40 minutes later (New York 4:01 p.m., Chicago 9:45 a.m.).
- *Cardinal*—Eastbound, departs Chicago two hours earlier (5:45 p.m.), Cincinnati 3:14 a.m., arrives New York 30 minutes earlier (10:30 p.m.). Westbound, Sundays departs New York 6:45 a.m. (instead of 8:55 a.m.); Wed., Fri. departs NY 7:05 a.m. (instead of 9:25 a.m.). Runs two hours earlier, Washington-Indianapolis, departing Cincinnati 1:10 a.m. Indianapolis 6:35 a.m.

(15 minutes earlier, after 2 hour dwell).

Tickets by U.S. mail, from Oct. 10, Amtrak will send only if trip starts at station with no ticket office or where ticket office is closed at departure time. FedEx (\$12 fee) delivery is still available on request (but see below).

Movies on Superliner lounges—Eliminated Oct. 30, except on *Auto Train* (and *Cascades* service). Personal digEplayers (December 2005 *News*) can be rented in Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles, Emeryville Chicago, Lorton and Sanford, more cities to come.

box for postal statement

Rail Travel Tips

Tip #14—Wait as long as possible before getting your tickets; preferably until day of travel.

This facilitates changes in travel plans and/or refunds. It also reduces danger of ticket loss or theft.

For Auto Train: your car will be accepted promptly if you have not been ticketed but *have* made advance payment, whether or not you changed your itinerary. If you get your tickets, but later made a change, you must park the car, go inside to exchange tickets, then retrieve your car and give it to the greeters.