
# Amtrak Now and Into the Future

## Oregon's Experience

Testimony before the Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials

Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

United States House of Representatives

November 13, 2019

Nancy Nathanson
State Representative, 13th District
Oregon State Legislature

Chairman Lipinski, Ranking Member Crawford, and other distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials:

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to submit written testimony for this important hearing "Amtrak Now and Into The Future." My name is Nancy Nathanson; I am in my 13th year as an elected member of the Oregon State Legislature. I represent a district in Eugene, home to the University of Oregon and a rapidly growing tech business scene. Eugene is also the southern terminus for the 466-mile Pacific Northwest Rail Corridor, which is one of eleven federally designated higher-speed rail corridors in the United States. This corridor runs through the economic engine for the Pacific Northwest, from Eugene through Portland, Seattle, and up to Vancouver B.C. Prior to my service in the legislature I served for a dozen years on the Eugene City Council, and that's when I started working on passenger rail issues, attending an inaugural meeting for the Cascadia Innovation Corridor in the 1990s and convening a forum in Eugene in the 2000s.

I am proud to be here today representing an area that is in the Congressional district of Chairman Peter DeFazio. Oregonians across our state, but particularly those of us in the 4th Congressional District, have benefited from Congressman DeFazio's commitment to critical infrastructure investment, and safety and modernization projects in road, rail, and ports, and for pedestrians and bikes. We appreciate his support for and leadership of innovative solutions addressing transportation challenges.

Like the Chairman, I have been a strong supporter of passenger rail in Oregon. For example, after passage and implementation of the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008, the states of Oregon and Washington were required to assume the full cost of operations of the Amtrak Cascades Service. The resulting spike in costs led to serious funding challenges for Oregon. During the 2015 legislative session, funding for Amtrak service between Eugene and Portland was threatened to be cut off. This would have been a tremendous blow to Eugene, and my constituents strongly spoke out in favor of preserving this important service. I am proud to say that Amtrak Cascades is still successfully operating today, and I believe the importance of this service to our state and region will only continue to grow over time.

One reason for my passenger rail optimism is that I know people in my community want transportation options. Whether they are young or old, students or commuters, they want to be able to get around easily and have a choice about whether they drive or not. Indeed, there is a wide variety of research indicating young drivers today are getting licenses at lower rates. For example, a 2017 article in the *Journal of Safety Research* concluded that between 2006 and 2015 the proportion of high school seniors with driver's licenses declined from 81% to 72%.[1] A study from the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute illustrates that the percentage of 18 years olds with driver licenses declined from 80.4 percent in 1983 to 60.1 percent in 2014.[2]

---

[1] Shults, Ruth A., and Allan F. Williams. "Trends in Teen Driver Licensure, Driving Patterns and Crash Involvement in the United States, 2006—2015." *Journal of Safety Research* 62 (2017): 181-84. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5712438/

[2] Sivak, Michael, and Brandon Schoettle. "Recent Decreases in the Proportion of Persons with a Driver's License Across All Age Groups." *University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute* (2016).

The American Driving Survey 2015-16 produced by American Automobile Association (AAA) indicates that senior citizens may be driving at lower rates. AAA reports reductions in number of driving trips made per day and a reduction of average daily number of minutes spent driving for drivers aged 65 to 74.[3] Further, students and working people want to be productive on their commute, not gripping the wheel driving congested highways.

I have heard from my constituents and from Oregonians that passenger rail service is vitally important for Oregon and the broader region, and that is why I have been working to ensure it continues to be available as a key link in our region's multimodal transportation system.

## Background on Passenger Rail Service in Oregon

Amtrak operates two national network trains, also known as long distance trains, in Oregon. The Coast Starlight and the Empire Builder run daily service with stops in Oregon. While that once-a-day service is helpful for many travelers on longer journeys heading into or out of the state, the service simply is not as useful for people who want to take day trips or move more quickly around Oregon and the region by rail.

In 1994, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) contracted with Amtrak to extend an existing short-distance train between Portland and Seattle down to Eugene with intermediate stops at Salem and Albany. This short distance service continued to grow and in 2000 ODOT added an additional train between Eugene and Portland.

Today, this short-distance service, known as Amtrak Cascades, is a state-supported Amtrak route with two roundtrips between Eugene and Portland, four roundtrips between Portland and Seattle, and two roundtrips between Seattle and Vancouver. With over 800,000 riders in FY18, the Amtrak Cascades service is one of the most heavily traveled corridors in the country.

The Amtrak Cascades service is also an example of how states can work together with Amtrak to address the service needs of a region. ODOT and the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) entered into an Interstate Agreement (IGA) that commits the two agencies to the concept of joint operation of the Amtrak Cascades service as a single corridor. The states split funding for the service. Oregon provides funding for the operation of the Portland-Eugene route and for the operation of several buses that feed into the route. ODOT also purchased two new 13-car trainsets that went into service in November 2013 on the Amtrak Cascades service. The Oregon trainsets joined the existing fleet of five trainsets providing the Amtrak Cascades service. By owning trains, Oregon has a stronger role as a partner in the Amtrak Cascades service.

Both Amtrak Cascades trains and the long-distance trains are operated on the tracks of privately owned host railroads in both Oregon and in Washington. In Oregon, trains run on Union Pacific-owned track and in Washington, they run on BNSF Railway tracks. Union Pacific handles all train dispatching in Oregon.

---

[3] https://aaafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/19-0226_AAAFTS-2018-ADAS-Research-Brief-Update_v1.pdf

# Challenges for States

### *Funding Challenges*

Oregon provides significant funding to ensure continued operations passenger rail service. For its portion of the Amtrak Cascades service, Oregon funds both capital and operating expenses. On the capital side, Oregon invested $38.4 million in two new trainsets in 2013 in order to support the expansion of Cascades service. Oregon state programs have also invested significant funds in improving the host railroads' underlying infrastructure. In 2015, ODOT's ConnectOregon program provided $4 million to the modernization of Union Pacific's Harrisburg Bridge, which allowed train speeds to increase from 30 to 70 miles per hour on the bridge. Work on the North Portland and Peninsula Junction Connection Improvements project is currently underway to upgrade switches and straighten track at two key junctions in North Portland to allow for faster train speeds and less congestion on the rail network. This $17.5 million effort was funded in part by an $8 million grant from the state-funded ConnectOregon program. Further, the Oregon State Legislature provided $2.6 million in state funds for the construction of a new rail siding at Brooks in the busy Willamette Valley portion of the corridor.

The Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 shifted operations cost for short-distance Amtrak routes to the states. Since 2013, Oregon has stepped up to cover these additional costs and keep the Amtrak Cascades trains running. In addition to these increased operations costs, Amtrak costs are increasing as well. In 2009, Amtrak's bill to Oregon for running the Cascades trains was $4.9 million. By 2013, that had risen to $6.7 million – an increase of 36 percent in four years, even before the higher costs under PRIIA began to incur. For 2019, these costs have reached $10.1 million. While it has been a struggle for those of us in the Oregon State Legislature, we have continually cobbled together the necessary resources to keep this service operating because, again, it is incredibly important to our constituents and to the region.

Oregon has dedicated significant state resources to improving this service, and the state continues to look for infrastructure projects that will improve passenger rail on time performance and the passenger experience. While states like Oregon have stepped up to help provide this funding, the state also needs a strong federal partner and sufficient funding to truly improve rail service.

### *On Time Performance (OTP)*

For the year 2018, Amtrak Cascades trains were on time in Oregon 73.3 percent of the time. That is the average rate for all trains, so it follows then that some trains would have better OTP rates (like the 86.6 percent rate for the northbound morning train) and some would be worse (like the 39.3 percent rate for the southbound evening train). An OTP rating of less than 40 percent is less than worse, it is simply abysmal.

Oregon and Washington are investing millions of dollars in keeping this service operating every year. These states are working incredibly hard to expand service and grow ridership, but with

OTP rates that do not even approach the 80 percent goals, it is nearly impossible to attract new riders. Business travelers cannot keep to their strict schedules if they arrive on time only 40 percent of the time. University students will choose other modes if they cannot get to and from school on time. Travelers will simply choose faster, more reliable modes if we cannot get this right. Our constituents are asking us to fix this problem.

A growing challenge for OTP in Oregon is freight rail interference, which accounts for nearly ¾ of the delay time. In the first quarter of 2019 alone, there were nearly 7,000 minutes of freight rail related delay on the Union Pacific system in Oregon. While federal law may give passenger trains preference over freight trains, this has not been Oregon's experience in practice.

***Other Challenges***

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has conclusively documented that freight train length among all seven Class I railroads has increased in recent years. According to GAO "…two Class I railroads indicated that their average train length has increased by about 25 percent since 2008, with average train lengths of 1.2 and 1.4 miles in 2017." One railroad even reported running a three-mile-long train twice a week.[4] Longer trains are frustrating to motorists who get stuck at grade crossings for increasing amounts of time and interfere with routine business and commerce. They also pose serious challenges for public health and safety as emergency vehicle access can be blocked for longer periods.

For the purposes of passenger rail, longer freight trains translate into longer delays for passenger trains. In Oregon's Willamette Valley, most sidings are not long enough to accommodate these ever longer trains. Passenger trains are forced onto sidings giving way to the longer, slower trains. Longer trains take more time to walk and inspect to identify problems in the event of a breakdown. It also takes longer trains more time to get up to speed.

Signals for train crew communications equipment can often be impeded by distance, terrain, weather, and obstructions. In testimony to an Oregon legislative committee on which I serve, we heard that the conductor and engineer sometimes cannot even communicate with each other by radio, and they travel through areas with no cell phone service. That's not just inconvenient, that's dangerous. One conductor described having to walk the length of the train, alone, to detect the location of a problem, in sometimes dark or severe weather conditions. This problem is about worker safety as well as extended delay.

Aging infrastructure and outdated equipment also contribute to delays. In addition to the major capital projects described above, Oregon's experience shows that the age and obsolescence of even smaller pieces of railroad infrastructure can have impacts on passenger rail service. During a recent winter freezing spell, a passenger train experienced a significant delay because of a frozen railroad switch. All passengers on board the train were forced to sit and wait as a crew member went out in the snow and sleet to move the switch manually. It is clear that upgrades are needed throughout the system.

[4] https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-19-443

# Potential Solutions

### *Provide States with Operating Funds*

Reliable passenger train service will become an even more important mode of travel as governments at all levels work to address the impacts of increasing highway congestion, population growth, and climate change. These are not solely state and local issues. In recent years, states have stepped into the breach and have continued funding short distance intercity passenger rail operations, but in order to truly grow the service, states need a strong federal partner. By restoring funding for passenger rail operations, Congress can help cities, regions, and states across the country deal with some of their most urgent problems.

### *More Reliable Capital Funding*

Reliable federal funding for capital projects will also help strengthen and grow passenger rail service. The Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act rail grants have been incredibly helpful to states, and by now these grants have funded billions of dollars of improvements in the nation's passenger and freight rail systems. Indeed, Oregon itself has benefitted from a Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) grant to uncork a key bottleneck in the state's rail system. However, these general fund supported grants are not reliably funded from year to year. Some years they receive hundreds of millions of dollars and some years they are completely zeroed out. Having reliable and predictable capital funding available every year will allow states and their partners to better plan for capital improvements that will benefit passenger and freight rail alike.

Further, passenger rail has been significantly underfunded. Each year, Amtrak receives approximately $1.5 billion to address passenger rail needs nationwide. This funding must cover everything from large-scale, capital projects on the Northeast Corridor to the operation of National Network trains around the country. A lack of reliable and robust funding makes it nearly impossible to meet all of the needs and challenges faced by Amtrak.

More capital funding for grant programs and Amtrak will allow states to have better and more efficient rail service, construct more separated grade crossings, eliminate more points of rail system congestion, and ensure a better customer experience.

### *Address Train Length*

Many challenges to public health and safety arise from longer freight trains. Impacts are also being felt on passenger rail OTP and ridership. States cannot resolve this problem alone. We have neither the funding to fix every siding and blocked crossing nor do we have the authority to address the length of trains. Congress and the Administration can reduce adverse impacts on communities and improve safety and passenger service by addressing train length.

***Improve On Time Performance***

Taken together, increased funding for capital projects and common sense limits on train length can certainly improve OTP. However, more must be done to address on time performance. I fear that without further action, we will continue on the trend of increased freight rail interference and lower OTP. Giving the Federal Rail Administration the tools it needs to achieve true passenger rail preference would be incredibly helpful for promoting better OTP.

As a member of the Governor's Passenger Rail Leadership Council I had the opportunity to hear and read comments about passenger rail from Oregonians around the state. And just a week ago I talked again with a successful high tech business owner in Eugene who takes the train frequently to Portland where the other half of his staff are located, because he wants to use his time, not waste his time. A retired real estate broker continually presses me at chamber of commerce meetings to support more and better train options.

Our young population, our seniors, our gig economy and tech … they all see the value of passenger trains, and they want more.

Investing dollars and time in passenger rail is smart policy, meeting multiple objectives in economy, energy, and environment. It's time to put more muscle into supporting a safe, efficient platform for Amtrak to succeed.

Chairman Lipinski and Ranking Member Crawford, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today.