

## Billion dollar facelift for Amtrak

JULY 22, 2009

---

More than a billion dollars will be used to expand rail service across the United States. Amtrak has released a list of overdue projects that will be funded by the \$1.3 billion from the Amtrak American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The investment package is broken into two separate accounts: One for railroad and station projects that will be funded at \$850 million, and one for security and life safety projects at \$450 million.

These Amtrak projects fulfill all of the objectives of the ARRA. They will improve the efficiency and accessibility of Amtrak trains and stations. They estimate this will result in the retention or creation of 6,000 jobs. It is encouraging to see the direction our country is taking to improve our nationwide transportation mobility, reduce our dependence on foreign oil and make a stronger passenger rail system.

Following are some of the projects to be performed with the ARRA funding. Rail cars and locomotives will receive \$82 million for train repair upgrades. This will be split between Amtrak's two maintenance facilities in Beech Grove, Ind. This is Amtrak's largest servicing facility. Bear, Del., will help fulfill this objective to rebuild or repair 68 stored or damaged passenger cars.

Many of the damaged cars have been stored at the Indiana facility, but very little work has been done because of the lack of funding. Once repaired, the cars will be used to alleviate congested portions of the system and possibly begin new services. The Beech Grove facility has plans to build washers for the cars, sandblasters and an air filtration system to help keep the employees healthy. Much of the work in Beech Grove will be focused on repairing the damaged passenger cars.

ADA Compliance: More than 200 stations in 40 states will receive needed upgrades and improved accessibility for persons with disabilities. Cost is \$40 million.

The state of Iowa will receive about \$400,000 in federal funding to improve access for persons with disabilities at Iowa's Amtrak stations in Mount Pleasant, Ocala, Ottumwa, Burlington, Ft. Madison and Creston. Iowa is served by Amtrak's California Zephyr and the Southwest Limited. Iowa's improvements will include new wheel chair lifts, new sidewalk and curb cuts from parking lots to the platforms and adding or relocating parking spots closer to the platforms for persons with disabilities.

Kansas will receive \$1 million to improve Amtrak stations in Newton, Lawrence, Garden City, Topeka, Dodge City and Hutchinson served by Amtrak Southwest Chief. The projects include signage, platform kiosks, wheelchair lifts and platform improvements. The Amtrak station in Newton, Kan. will receive \$700,000 for a new wheelchair lift and enclosures, new pads for lifts and sidewalks to the station platform, improvements to crossing platforms and paint markings for accessible parking stalls.

Amtrak's Silver Star from New York to Miami continues to gain riders, increasing by 4 percent in December 2008. Results in January 2009 were even better, as ridership rose 18 percent compared to figures from 2008. Ridership on overnight trains is up and part of the explanation is that Amtrak's on-time performance has improved as reported by Ross Capon, president of the National Association of Railroad Passengers.

Amtrak finished fiscal year 2008 with an 11.1 percent increase in ridership, a record of 28.7 million passengers. Long distance ridership grew 6.8 percent through December 2008. Short distance travel grew 4.2 percent during this period. People don't want to replace their car as early as in the past, so they are looking at trains as an alternative mode of travel. States with well developed rail programs stand a better chance of receiving federal funding.

My most recent Amtrak trip in late June to San Antonio and return on the Texas Eagle was a pleasant experience. The train was full both ways; lots of families traveling with children, many first-time travelers, excellent food and service, a clean train and on time both directions. I fulfilled my granddaughter Kira's dream of getting to sleep in a sleeping car on the train bringing her back from Texas.