

High-speed rail: Rebirth of Intercity Passenger Service

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These are exciting and historic times to be in the passenger railroad business. Passenger rail in the U.S. is on the verge of a renaissance and we must seize this opportunity to fully realize its potential. Those of us at Amtrak, and many other supporters around the country, now truly have a chance to provide Virginians and the rest of America with a fresh and effective approach to meeting their transportation needs.

Nationally, events have converged in the past couple of years, putting a focus on improving and expanding intercity passenger rail. First, deteriorating infrastructure resulting in exasperating air travel experiences and overcrowded highways has helped make Amtrak an attractive alternative.

For example, since the introduction of Amtrak's high-speed Acela in 2000, we have seen a shift of passengers from airlines to the rails along the Washington-New York-Boston Northeast Corridor (NEC).

Second, the spike in gasoline prices last summer forced renewed focus on the individual and societal costs of petroleum-intensive transportation and helped spur record Amtrak ridership.

And third, recently enacted federal legislation, the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act of 2008 (PRIIA), has energized Amtrak and provides states with new funding sources for intercity passenger rail development.

This legislation, for the first time, gives states a significant role in shaping and funding our national intercity passenger rail network. For our part, Amtrak is prepared to be both mentor to states as they create their plans and apply for federal grants and be their partner as operator of new or expanded services.

Quickly jumpstarting the efforts begun under PRIIA was the enactment this February of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). This legislation provides \$8 billion in seed money to help the states and Amtrak begin the development of a high-speed rail system in the United States. Today, Amtrak operates the fastest trains in the Western Hemisphere on our NEC, reaching cruising speeds between 110 and 150 miles per hour.

However, outside the NEC, top speeds generally do not exceed 79 mph. The PRIIA and ARRA legislation will help the states and Amtrak start the process of raising that speed to 110 mph in appropriate corridors by installing or expanding new safety technologies such as Positive Train Control, upgrading tracks and sidings, and adding capacity and reliability by eliminating rail infrastructure bottlenecks.

Federally designated high-speed rail corridors like the commonwealth's corridor connecting Washington, D.C., to North Carolina will be well-positioned for more and faster service in the future.

Why start with 110 mph as a goal? It is a speed that is trip-time competitive with highway travel and, in some markets, with air for downtown-to-downtown travel times. The infrastructure requirements of 110 mph operation are less demanding than for speeds exceeding that and, therefore, much less costly, including conventional diesel locomotive power, lower-cost highway rail grade crossing technology, and upgrades to existing track structure.

These achievable improvements can be accomplished in a few years rather than decades, and for tens of millions of dollars instead of billions on many routes.

Speeds higher than 110 mph require installation of electrification, grade separation for highway crossings, and, frequently, significant right-of-way and track realignment.

Practically speaking, raising top speeds from 79 mph to 110 mph yields a 40 percent increase in speed, and a 40 percent reduction in trip time between two stations, provided speeds are sustained. That is a significant reduction in travel time in any market, and top speeds -- no matter how impressive -- are subordinate to net travel time.

As we aim to develop this network of high-speed rail corridors, our near-term focus should be on improving reliability of today's services; reducing trip times through targeted infrastructure investments; increasing speeds; adding to the frequencies to existing routes; and developing service to new markets, where justified.

Guiding all of these improvements will be our desire to quickly improve mobility in an environmentally benign way and at a reasonable cost to the passenger and tax-payer.

Amtrak is in a unique position to assist states with planning and implementing these exciting changes that have been so long awaited and needed. With the recent announcement of new service in Virginia between Washington and Lynchburg and Richmond, Amtrak now partners with 15 states to provide supplemental passenger train service, augmenting the basic national system.

That wide range of state-supported services is a major pillar of Amtrak's core business and accounts for 47 percent of our systemwide ridership. And, we intend to grow that business in the years to come.

Crucial to the success of state-supported lines is their connectivity with other Amtrak routes. Interline reservations and ticketing and access to Amtrak's entire national passenger rail network makes these routes convenient and user-friendly.

Working with states and the Federal Railroad Administration, which will be overseeing distribution of federal funds for intercity and high-speed rail development, we at Amtrak look forward to rolling up our sleeves and making passenger rail the greener, safer, healthier and better-connected transportation option it needs and promises to be.

As the nation's intercity passenger rail operator, Amtrak understands the needs, opportunities, and challenges associated with creating and operating new passenger rail service and is able to provide the leadership and technical assistance necessary to successfully help states and ultimately the nation reach that goal.

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