

## **Amtrak privatization plan is short-sighted; we should invest in rail**

By Rep. Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.) - 06/08/11 06:35 PM ET

On the heels of a historic vote to end Medicare, Republicans are picking up steam in their rush to dismantle another highly popular and successful program. Next stop on the Elimination Express? Amtrak.

Under the false promise of better service and cost savings, Republicans on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee will soon unveil a partisan plan to dismantle Amtrak and auction off its assets to the highest bidder. Doubling down on this risky bet, they want to hand over the conductor's cap to the same folks who ran the stock market off a cliff.

Privatizing passenger rail in the Northeast Corridor will not merely affect train service in that region; it will have a crippling domino effect on train service from sea to shining sea. Because of its national scope, Amtrak is able to invest profits from the Northeast Corridor to offset less profitable long-distance lines in other parts of the country.

In West Virginia, Amtrak runs the Cardinal, a route that connects New York to Chicago, three days a week. I have long advocated for the return of daily Cardinal service because it is a lifeline for rural communities and an engine of economic growth for the region. Privatizing Amtrak's profits in the Northeast Corridor means we will see trains like the Cardinal stuck at the station across the nation.

Congress created Amtrak in 1970 to take over passenger rail services previously operated by private rail companies that were literally begging to hand off this responsibility after years of declining ridership and financial losses. Private companies did not want to run passenger rail service then, and there is very little evidence they want to do so now.

Two years ago, the U.S. Department of Transportation invited proposals from private companies to develop high-speed rail in the United States. Not one single proposal was submitted by the private sector for developing high-speed rail in the Northeast Corridor. Not a one. And at a January roundtable in Grand Central Terminal in New York City, the committee heard from several private companies that they would need to see substantial federal funding in order to consider investing.

This may feel like *déjà vu* for some people, as we have been down this route of trying to rip apart Amtrak rail tie by rail tie before. Despite repeated attempts to derail Amtrak through starvation budgets, congressional efforts to eliminate routes and a Bush administration proposal to destroy Amtrak through bankruptcy, it has survived. In fact, ridership is reaching record highs, Amtrak is turning a profit in the Northeast Corridor and it is thriving like never before.

Congress came together in 2008 and charted a new course for passenger rail in America. The bipartisan Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act, which passed the House with the support of nearly 75 percent of my colleagues, created two national programs for the development of high-speed and intercity passenger rail in the U.S.

That legislation laid the tracks for President Obama's Vision for High-Speed Rail, which called for historic investments in the development of high-speed rail, and the \$9.3 billion included for that purpose in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 — the most significant investment in passenger rail since the creation of Amtrak in the 1970s.

In September 2010, Amtrak unveiled a plan for development of “true high-speed rail” in the Northeast Corridor, with the ability to reach speeds of 220 miles per hour. Its bold vision would cost \$117 billion over 30 years and would create hundreds of thousands of American jobs. Some on the other side of the aisle have criticized these estimates, but that investment pales in comparison to what other countries are spending on high-speed rail and the \$1.8 trillion this country has spent on our world-class highway and aviation systems.

We ought to be looking at ways to help Amtrak achieve the goal of high-speed rail; not looking at ways to dismantle it. We should be celebrating Amtrak's 40th birthday; not writing it off as being “over the hill” and suggesting it retire. We should be united in cheering on its success; not trying to kick it in the caboose by selling off its assets to private companies.