

Democrats Hope Amtrak Ridership Record Stalls Rail Privatization Efforts

By Nathan Hurst, CQ Staff

Democrats on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee are hoping that Amtrak's announcement of record-breaking ridership will stymie talk of privatizing the money-losing passenger railway.

The National Railroad Passenger Corp., as Amtrak is formally known, said Thursday that it carried 30.2 million passengers in fiscal 2011, the most since its 1971 inception.

The increase from 28.7 million passengers in fiscal 2010 marks the eighth time in nine years that Amtrak has set a ridership record.

[Nick J. Rahall II](#) of West Virginia, the committee's ranking Democrat, seized on the opportunity to criticize a plan by the panel's chairman, Florida Republican [John L. Mica](#), to privatize high-speed rail on the profitable Northeast Corridor between Washington and Boston.

"It makes no sense to tear apart a railroad and its workforce while they are succeeding at their jobs," Rahall said in a written statement. "That is no way to run a railroad."

Amtrak reported record ridership on 26 of its 44 routes in fiscal 2011, which includes Northeast Regional service between Washington and Boston. Acela Express, the high-speed service running along the same route but with fewer stops and upgraded trains, reported its second-highest ridership year.

Push for Privatization

Success along the Northeast Corridor led Mica earlier this year to propose separating the 363-mile Northeast Corridor from Amtrak and requiring the Transportation Department to solicit bids from private operators to maintain, upgrade and operate the line.

Amtrak officials estimate a \$117 billion price tag to overhaul the heavily traveled Northeast Corridor to increase train speeds. They envision operating trains along the East Coast that could eventually travel at 200 miles an hour, slicing travel time between Washington's Union Station and New York's Pennsylvania Station to about 90 minutes.

Supporters of Mica's proposal estimate that as much as \$60 billion could be taken in through a sale of Amtrak's profitable Northeast assets, though no firm or group has yet expressed interest.

Mica and a key supporter of his plan, Rail Subcommittee Chairman [Bill Shuster](#), R-Pa., have said they support reintroducing private operators into the U.S. intercity passenger-rail market, in addition to a wholesale sell-off of the Northeast Corridor to private owners.

Meanwhile, some of Amtrak's growing ridership numbers are occurring on routes that the White House has indicated it would like to see incorporated into part of a nationwide high-speed rail network.

To fete the record-breaking numbers, railroad executives pinned a rider from St. Louis as the official "30 millionth passenger," a woman who frequently travels along the Chicago-St. Louis corridor that was identified as a candidate for a high-speed rail upgrade.

Since announcing the \$10 billion plan to upgrade rail lines throughout the United States, the White House encountered stiff opposition from Republican House members and some GOP governors, forcing officials to divvy up smaller grants through the Transportation Department.