

## **Under House Bill, Northeast Corridor Would No Longer be Amtrak-Run**

By Kathryn A. Wolfe, CQ Staff

The House’s surface transportation bill may contain language that would spin the Northeast Corridor away from Amtrak, leaving the private sector and states to operate many of the passenger railroad’s most profitable and viable routes.

[John L. Mica](#), R-Fla., chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said Thursday that he will be introducing legislation soon that would “[look] at taking the Northeast Corridor out of Amtrak’s purview, probably transferring it to DOT.”

Mica also said that the Northeast Corridor, which contains Amtrak’s most financially successful routes, would be “put up for private sector bid.”

“We would take offers from the private sector to control and operate the infrastructure and also operate the train sets,” Mica said during a hearing before his committee on private sector involvement in the Northeast Corridor.

Mica also suggested that states would become the entities with primary responsibility over the lines, including taking and letting bids for operating routes from the private sector.

He predicted that this structure would free the Northeast Corridor for true high-speed rail development quickly, in contrast with

Amtrak's plan, which is expected to unfold over about 30 years. Mica said his plan would take a third of the time and make the federal government money in the process.

"The only thing standing in the way [of high-speed rail] right now is Amtrak or the federal government or Congress," Mica said.

He added that his legislation would require trains to run the Washington to downtown Manhattan route in no more than two hours.

Mica has long been a critic of Amtrak, which he has described as a "Soviet style bureaucracy," and a proponent of privately operated passenger rail.

[Nick J. Rahall II](#) of West Virginia, the ranking Democrat on the committee, said Mica's proposal was little more than another attempt to get rid of Amtrak.

"While we have not yet been provided the details of this proposal I fear that is just another veiled attempt at derailing Amtrak under the guise of better service and cost savings," Rahall said.

He noted that two years ago the Transportation Department issued a request for proposals asking for private sector bids to operate high-speed passenger rail lines.

"Guess how many companies were chomping at the bit to get their hands on these projects?" Rahall said. "Not a one."

The two sides also had different take-aways from a recent roundtable meeting intended to determine the potential interest the private sector may have in operating passenger rail service.

Rahall said several private investors “clearly stated that they would need to see substantial federal funding in order to consider investing.”

Mica, meanwhile, said the meeting showed that the private sector was indeed interested in servicing high-speed passenger rail routes.

He did not say explicitly whether the measure would be included in his surface transportation bill, which he hopes to introduce in June. However, he hinted strongly that it may be part of that legislation, which he has previously said he expects to have a “robust” rail title.

Democrats said including some kind of Amtrak privatization language inside the text of a surface transportation bill would be a poison pill that would kill the bill altogether.

“I hope that any such provision is not in the reauthorization bill,” said committee member [Jerrold Nadler](#), D-N.Y. “I doubt we’d be able to unify on this type of proposal.”

Del. [Eleanor Holmes Norton](#), D-D.C., was more pointed, saying a clean surface transportation bill in this fiscal environment would be hard enough without provisions that create partisan acrimony.

“Unless there is bipartisan agreement about a surface transportation bill it will kill the transportation bill and it will get nowhere,” Norton said.