

Amtrak's Improving Finances May Help Pitch to Congress

By Nathan Hurst, CQ Roll Call

Amtrak lost \$361 million in 2012 — and the passenger railroad's chief said that's good news that will help him make his case to Congress this year for a boost in capital investment.

"That's the lowest level in 38 years for Amtrak in terms of a loss," Amtrak President and Chief Executive Joseph A. Boardman told reporters Thursday in a conference call. "We think the numbers are right. Now it's time to start talking about what policies we want."

Boardman expects to get his opportunity later this year, when Congress is expected to take up a reauthorization of rail programs. The current authorization ([PL 110-432](#)) expires in September.

"I hope I get called up there to start talking about that," said Boardman, who has argued that Congress has starved the agency of investment in significant capital improvements that could set the railroad on a self-sustaining track.

The national passenger railroad announced a slew of improvements planned in the year ahead, including an upgrade to higher-speed on-board Internet access for passengers, as well as purchases of new electric locomotives and passenger cars to replace rolling stock that, in some cases, has been in use since the 1940s.

Amtrak also plans to begin environmental reviews on planned replacements and expansions of two tunnels: one in Baltimore and the other connecting Manhattan with New Jersey.

Boardman also hopes to forge ahead on Amtrak's plans to bring true high-speed passenger rail service to the Northeast Corridor. He may face less hostility than before in the Republican-controlled House, where Pennsylvania Republican [Bill Shuster](#) replaces Amtrak critic John A. Mica as chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. Shuster had been chairman of the Railroads, Pipelines and Hazardous Materials Subcommittee.

Amtrak has struggled to achieve overall profitability since Congress cobbled together the remains of several failing private rail companies in 1970 ([PL 91-518](#)) to create a national passenger railroad.

But the company has succeeded in boosting ridership, particularly in the densely populated corridor from Boston to Washington, where the faster Acela Express service has challenged airlines. Long-distance routes have continued to be a drag on Amtrak's bottom line.

In recent weeks, Boardman has filled numerous leadership positions as Amtrak prepares to work with lawmakers on the reauthorization, which is expected to include mandates for significant changes in Amtrak operations.