



NARP: Fix Amtrak's Idle Cars

In a written statement submitted to the House Appropriations subcommittee with jurisdiction over Amtrak, NARP Executive Director Ross Capon characterized "\$1.785 billion as a minimum appropriation for Amtrak for Fiscal 2009 in the absence of a responsible request by the Bush Administration."

He also wrote, "Looking forward, we strongly urge the next Congress and Administration to take seriously the \$9 billion a year recommendation of intercity passenger train investments contained in the report of the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study

Commission."

He also suggested that the short-term \$1.785 billion should increase to enable Amtrak to return to service the over 100 cars idled for repairs, and to address track capacity problems such as in northwestern Indiana along Norfolk Southern's mainline (front-page photo, April News).

Fixing idle cars is a relatively quick way to increase Amtrak's capacity; that work and the track work would be logical elements of a stimulus package to give Americans meaningful jobs.

NARP's statement said "sold-out trains on Amtrak means we don't have enough

capacity to meet current demand, and certainly not the larger demand that is likely in the future as more people seek alternatives to high and rising gasoline prices and airline fares."

The \$1.785 billion results from adding Amtrak's formal request of \$1.671 billion and the \$114 million worth of back pay recommended for Fiscal 2009 by the Presidential Emergency Board and needed to keep labor peace. ■

Our statements to House and Senate appropriators are at www.narprail.org, click on "What's New?"

Downeaster Moves A Big Step Closer to Brunswick

The Maine Senate passed LD2019 on April 18, assuring its enactment. This followed great difficulties in the joint appropriations committee where Gov. John Baldacci's (D) endorsement made passage possible.

TrainRiders Northeast Chairman (and NARP Vice President) Wayne Davis said LD2019 means that "within two years tracks can be in shape to extend the *Downeasters* to Freeport and Brunswick. What's more, this 28-mile extension will connect with the 56-mile Brunswick-Bath-Wiscasset-Rockland line. Maine Eastern Railroad already runs seasonal passenger train service there, and that will go daily when Amtrak reaches Brunswick. So adding 28 miles really expands our intercity train network by 84 miles.

"This also lays groundwork for connecting service on the state-owned Brunswick-Augusta line and between Yarmouth Jct. (near Freeport) and Auburn-Lewiston, Bethel and perhaps Montreal."

LD2019 funds the State Transit, Aviation and Rail Transportation Fund (STAR). It is estimated that the funding mechanism—50% of a tax on rental cars—will put \$3.1 million a year into the fund in 2009 and 2010.

Still unresolved is how the state will deal with expiration next year of federal

UNH Loves the Downeaster



Durham began as a weekend-only stop but became daily and now has ridership second only to Boston. University of New Hampshire is doing a \$1 million renovation and expansion of the historic station in the center of campus, which should be completed in June, and which includes moving Quik-Trak ticket machine from Student Union to station. —Photo: David R. Johnson

operating funds that have supported *Downeaster* since its December, 2001, start. Gov. Baldacci has pledged to include operating funds in his supplemental budget request.

Advocates are encouraged that George Campbell on April 8 was approved as New Hampshire's Transportation

Commissioner. He held that post in Maine 1980-84, coincidental with early *Downeaster* groundwork.

Congratulations to TrainRiders Northeast and especially to Wayne Davis. Of course, the real winners are the traveling public, who will see more and better transportation options in the near future! ■

New York City “Dead-End” Tunnels: Missed Service, Security Opportunities

Less than a year ago, New Jersey Transit visited our offices to tout the agency’s plan to build two new railroad tunnels under the Hudson River.

Although the tracks would feed into a separate Manhattan station near Penn Station (NYP), which many rail advocates oppose, rather than extend to Grand Central where most commuters want to go, the plan did include a critical Manhattan-side link between the new tunnels and NYP.

Vital New Tunnel-NYP Link

This vital link has since vanished. The current, \$7.6 billion plan serves only a deep cavern station under 34th Street—three tracks over three tracks, with the bottom level too deep for later extension to Grand Central Terminal.

In testimony at NJ Transit’s April 1 New York City hearing, and in an April 9 letter to New Jersey Gov. Jon S. Corzine and New York Gov. David Paterson, NARP Executive Director Ross Capon advocated restoration of the link, which would provide vital track capacity and operational flexibility and also protect the rail network in general and Manhattan in particular in event of a tunnel closure.

The track capacity problem already exists because growth of weekend demand for both commuter and intercity trains increasingly bumps up against tunnel maintenance needs, which already are limited to a 55-hour weekend window.

The missing link obviously would improve service reliability, for example, by letting dispatchers run around a disabled train and deal more smoothly with late trains.

If existing tunnels were impassable

No one likes to contemplate either temporary or quasi-permanent loss of tunnels for any reason, but a link between the new tunnels and NYP would permit maintenance of some intercity service—and better commuter service—even if today’s two, century-old tunnels became inoperable.

However, lacking both the link and use of the old tunnels, NJT’s huge commuter operation would be reduced to what could fit into their planned small, new “deep cavern” station, while Amtrak service at NYP would be limited to New England and Empire Corridor (New York State) services; Philadelphia-Washington-and-beyond trains would have to terminate at Newark, with passengers relying on

PATH trains to and from Manhattan.

Blocking the Future

The NJT project as currently designed provides no new “slots” for Amtrak at NYP, and appears to preclude subsequent investment aimed at providing those slots. This is absurd, since New York City has this hemisphere’s greatest potential for diverting short intercity trips from air to rail, even before considering recent indications that the price of oil is driving and will drive even more demand from air to Amtrak.

It’s tough to build a new right-of-way under crowded Manhattan; the closer to the surface one goes, the more people object. Even the present project has its share of businesses testifying that they should not be affected.

Environmental Issues: Two Views

Stated reasons for the current, deep cavern approach include to avoid breaching a historic “Hudson River Bulkhead” and to avoid cut-and-cover construction in a new Hudson River Park, both in Manhattan. On this basis, Sierra Club and New York League of Conservation Voters testified April 1 in favor of the revised project.

NARP thinks a broader view of the environment would take into account the long-term consequences of letting this project go ahead in its present form: more travel on cars and planes and less on trains, when compared with a project that includes the east-shore link.

Witnesses at NJT’s hearings (Newark,

Mar. 31; NYC, Apr. 1) who supported restoring the east-shore link included William Henderson, executive director of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA (New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority), and representatives of New Jersey Association of Railroad Passengers, Empire State Passengers Association and the Lackawanna Coalition and members of the members of the Regional Rail Working Group. NARP Board Members David Alan, George Halkalis and Albert Papp testified in various capacities.

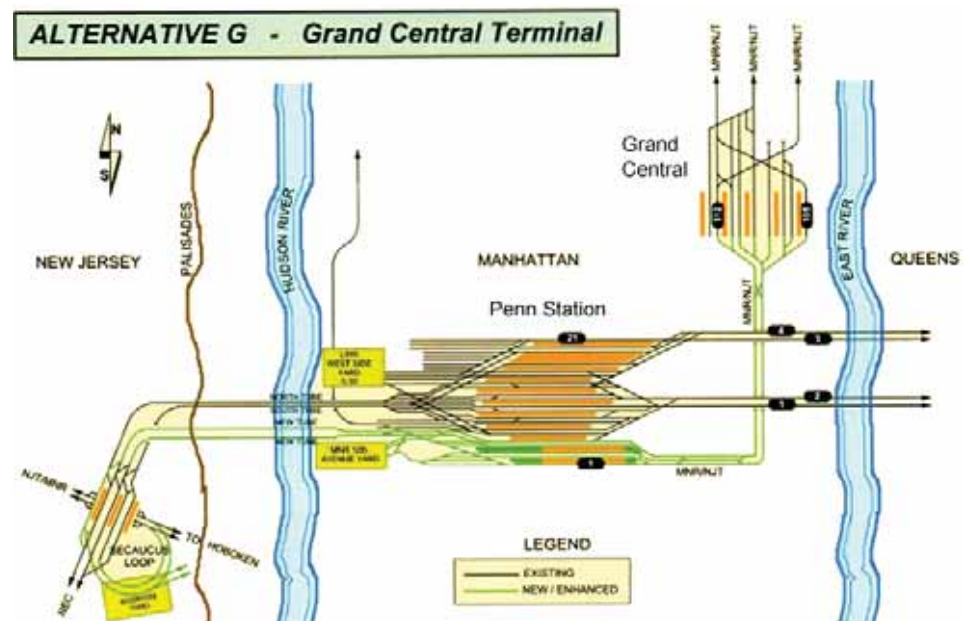
Needed: Alternative G

In the “Access to the Region’s Core” (ARC) 2003 Major Investment Study (MIS)—jointly sponsored by NJT, MTA and the Port Authority of NY & NJ—“Alternative G...would create a rail link between Penn Station and the lower level of Grand Central Terminal shared by NJ Transit and Metro-North.” Alternative G would *not* involve a new, dead-end terminal in the NYP area.

Alternative G had the lowest construction and equipment costs of the considered alternatives, the biggest diversion of commuters from autos and the biggest time savings for commuters. While it also was estimated to have the highest “costs for real estate acquisitions and easements,” this was based on rough guesses; real estate costs were “to be determined” [formally estimated] later.

Unfortunately, the public only has

(continued on Page 4)



Senate Considers Amtrak, Transit funds, Highway Deficit

Amtrak issues shared the stage with possible Highway Trust Fund bankruptcy at the April 3 hearing of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies, chaired by Patty Murray (D-WA).

Senators expressed disappointment at how the Bush Administration dealt with the shortfall—funding transit \$202 million below what the SAFETEA-LU law called for, and “transferring” \$3.2 billion from the Fund’s transit account to the highway account. The latter postponed beyond 2009 the day of reckoning for highways but advanced it for transit. Sen. Christopher Bond (R-MO), the subcommittee’s top Republican, likened it to “putting a small band aid on a [large] bleeding wound.”

Murray called the HTF proposals “unrealistic and irresponsible.” Referencing the \$3.2 billion, she said “the Administration likes to call this unprecedented transfer a ‘loan’...As I see it, this loan will only bankrupt the transit account faster – and that is unacceptable...I have been working on a short-term solution with the Finance Committee to get enough revenues into the trust fund to avoid painful cuts next year...We need to pass [the Finance] bill – and soon.”

As to a second stimulus bill, Murray said “now is the time to increase – not cut – infrastructure spending. But I also believe that the money must come from the general fund – not the trust fund... The President’s supplemental request for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan includes almost \$777 million for improved bridges and roads – in Iraq and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, there are 21 states – including mine and Senator Bond’s – waiting for federal funding that they are owed for the repair of highways and bridges damaged or destroyed in declared disaster areas.”

Amtrak

Murray said “you would think that with gas prices like these, even the Bush Administration might reconsider the merits of an energy efficient mode of travel like Amtrak. Unfortunately, it hasn’t.”

Bond called the Bush Administration’s \$800 million request for Amtrak a “non-starter,” and expressed concern that the Administration is “proposing funding cuts” but not offering guidance as to how Amtrak would live with the cuts. Bond: “DOT has sole authority to approve or disapprove Amtrak’s [route specific] grant requests. Are there any cases where the

Secretary has denied a request?”

He noted that Federal Railroad Administrator Joseph Boardman, a member of Amtrak’s board, voted against Amtrak’s budget request (*NARP News*, March). He asked if this was “because of the budget numbers or because of the lack of reforms at Amtrak.” Answer: the budget.

Back Pay: Presidential Emergency Board 242 (PEB) recommended that Amtrak workers get back pay in two phases, with 60% or \$114 million coming in 2009, 12 months after contract ratification.

USDOT Assistant Inspector General David Tornquist said Amtrak could pay this from its expected \$286.7 million end-of-year cash balance, but Amtrak President Alex Kummant said such a projection was premature. He cautioned that Amtrak last year came within three weeks of running out of cash “by the time we got our first [federal] grant in February.”

Under the new Amtrak/union agreements, Amtrak (at the discretion of its board) could notify the unions next year that funding is not adequate to provide the second tranche of back pay, due in June (12 months after the agreements were ratified), and the unions could strike 60 days thereafter.

Amtrak “Reforms”: Tornquist said Amtrak “has benefited from the strong leadership” of [Chairwoman Donna] McLean and Kummant, but Amtrak’s 2009 budget has no new reforms that produce operating savings. Bond zeroed in on this, calling it “a great big black hole” in Amtrak’s 2009 budget request, which he contrasted with \$61.3 million in savings in FY 2005, \$52.8 million in 2006, and \$40.3 million in 2007.

Kummant responded that “food reforms continue” and big, new reforms are under way but will take longer to bear fruit: e-ticketing, reconfiguring mechanical work, and working with the states to get higher payments from them.

Bond noted that the PEB supported no work rule reforms, saying he had tried to have a PEB witness and speculated that this didn’t happen because they did not want to defend their “no work rule change” recommendation.

However, Transportation Communications International Union Vice President Joel Parker testified that “no one could possibly call this [PEB] a pro-labor Board.” He called the 2.6% a year pay increases, net of employee health contri-

butions, modest.

Parker also said “for the first time, in a long time, labor peace is possible at Amtrak.” Likewise, Murray in her opening statement looked forward to the end of “a period of very sour labor-management relations at Amtrak.”

Fairytales Budget?: As on the House side, Boardman was pressed on how Amtrak could avoid bankruptcy if the Administration’s budget request was adopted, after Tornquist and Amtrak leaders said bankruptcy would be unavoidable (Kummant qualifying his answer, “in the absence of draconian change”).

Boardman said the states could pay more, starting with New York, which pays nothing for the legacy Empire Corridor service. He referred also to e-ticketing and mechanical issues earlier cited by Kummant. However, Kummant reminded senators that “we have to spend the money first” before those operating savings could be realized.

Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) reminded everyone of the congestion and energy issues that make trains so important. He questioned Tornquist about the DOT Inspector General’s Amtrak on-time performance study done at Lautenberg’s request and released April 1 (see box). ■

Witnesses’ written statements are at <http://appropriations.senate.gov/hearings.cfm?s=thr> (April 3 hearing), where you also can listen to the hearing.

Inspector General Focuses on Amtrak On-Time Performance

At the request of Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ), the Department of Transportation Inspector General issued a report on April 1 about the economic impact of Amtrak’s on time performance.

The report concluded that raising non-Northeast Corridor on-time performance to 85% could reduce Amtrak’s operating loss by 30%, including from lower overtime and fuel costs and higher revenues from more repeat business.

The report noted Amtrak’s efforts to improve on time performance in the Northeast Corridor (now at 86%) and the resulting increases in ridership and revenue.

The report is at <<http://www.oig.dot.gov/item.jsp?id=2273>>



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our mission: a modern, customer-focused national passenger train network that provides a travel choice americans want.

New York Tunnels from page 2

access to a 31-page “Summary Report” from that huge MIS. NARP has joined other advocates in pressing for full disclosure of the relevant factors in this study which may have led to the choice of what we think is the wrong alternative.

Other Views

The Regional Plan Association testified in support of the current plan, while adding that “there ought to be a second phase,” extending tracks to GCT.

One NJT official told NARP that, while the individual problems with the link are not insurmountable, taken together they

threatened to stretch out the project and make it unaffordable and impossible. There is concern that the Army Corps of Engineers would never approve breaching the bulkhead.

The complete absence of federal leadership regarding intercity passenger trains is also a problem—there is no money at the table to support intercity investments, and U.S. DOT has been silent.

We would like to believe that, if both governors understood what was at stake, they would knock heads and get the right project done. As Capon wrote to the governors, “Fifty, or even 20 years from now, no one will care whether the new tunnels

opened in 2017 [the current plan] or a few years later. But they will care about what those tunnels do—and they will care passionately if the existing tunnels are ever shut down.”

Technically, the recent hearings (and written statements due April 28) deal not with the project’s merits but only with National Environmental Policy Act compliance. However, this is a chance to remind public officials what is important. ■

NARP’s April 1 statement and April 9 letter to the governors are at www.narprail.org click on Info and Links and then NARP Reports, Comments, and Letters to Officials.

TRAVELERS’ ADVISORY

Amtrak New England service outage—From Sat., June 14 through Tues., June 17, while new Thames River bridge is installed, no trains will run between Boston and New Haven, and service will be reduced between New York, New Haven and Springfield. The only Boston-New York service will be a single round-trip via Springfield. On June 14-15, the eastbound trip may involve changes at both New Haven and Springfield; Amtrak at NARP’s request is considering through-train service. NARP has expressed concern to Amtrak and its board over the near-total abandonment of this key market for four days, with no substitute bus bridge (i.e. Boston-Hartford; New Haven-Providence). Providence and New London are left “high and dry.”

New Timetable effective May 12—Most changes not listed below are minor.

- Most NEC trains retimed due to trackwork in New Jersey, with some trains operate at different times and/or making different station stops.

- Acela Express: New York-Boston gets one additional round-trip, but the one-stop Washington-New York round-trip is discontinued.

- Eastbound *Lake Shore Limited* runs 15-40 minutes earlier from Toledo to Albany.

- Four *Downeaster* trains operate seventy to ninety minutes earlier: trains 690, 694, 691, 693.

- *Cascades*: Train 500 operates 15 minutes earlier, Portland-Seattle (no change Eugene-Portland). Train 517

will have a published Vancouver, BC, departure time of 5:45 p.m. at request of Customs and Immigration; no passengers allowed to board after 5:45; actual departure remains 6:00.

- Merced-Monterey-Santa Cruz Thruway Bus connection to/from *San Joaquin* service eliminated due to low ridership. Monterey and Santa Cruz still served by other Thruway buses.

More Coast Starlight restored—From April 15 north and April 16 south, a full service train has operated Los Angeles-Klamath Falls, bus bridge Klamath-Eugene, and “stub train” (coach and Sightseer Lounge) Portland-Seattle. At press time, it was hoped the *Starlight* would operate all the way between Los Angeles and Seattle again starting in early May.