TESTIMONY

OF

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BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON RAILROAD, PIPELINES, AND HAZARDOUS MATERIALS

OF THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

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Good morning, Madam Chair and Mr. Shuster, and thank you for the opportunity to testify before this Committee on the subject of Amtrak's reauthorization. We recently celebrated Amtrak's 37th anniversary. Amtrak opened its doors for business on May 1, 1971, and took over the vast majority of the nation's existing intercity rail passenger services from twenty Class I carriers. At the time, this was widely viewed as a nice farewell gesture to passenger trains, which were not expected to survive the decade, despite growing highway and airport congestion and the skyrocketing price of oil.

Today, as you know, we are seeing record numbers of Americans choosing Amtrak for its convenience, its comfort, and its environmentally friendly qualities. I think we can take a little justified pride in the work we have done over the years to make sure that the trains keep coming, and it is a tribute to the many people who have worked for Amtrak and to our front line employees who deliver the product every day. For our part, we appreciate the strong support we have enjoyed from the general public, the Congress, and the members of this Committee who have been such strong public advocates for passenger rail service.

I am very pleased that your Committee has decided to consider the question of a reauthorization for Amtrak, a measure that is timely and important, and I will speak directly to the bill you have introduced. But first, I want to make the point that a lot has changed since our last reauthorization was enacted in 1997. The gallon of unleaded that cost $1.24 in October, 1997 costs $3.72 today. Congestion is increasing and the national highway infrastructure has begun to show signs of fatigue. Even before I arrived at Amtrak, I was convinced that there is a future for

passenger rail in the United States. We need a strong national transportation policy that recognizes the role rail can play in our national life. Our transportation policy needs to evolve and I think it will evolve, and this authorization must eventually become a part of an integrated national policy where rail will play a meaningful and relevant role.

To that end, I think we need to work harder at using our existing resources and infrastructure to make better policy. In the last ten years, state governments have redefined rail service – as a congestion mitigator, an engine of development, and an environmentally friendly way of providing for travel needs on existing networks, and this is an example of a creative and successful use of existing resources and infrastructure. We need to find transportation solutions that will build system connectivity, allow consumers a range of relevant choices, and develop the funding streams that will allow us to plan, build and operate our services without the turmoil of the annual funding cycle. I am pleased that this bill recognizes that need and incorporates both in spirit and intent measures that will allow us not just to pursue and extend successful policies, but to begin the larger national debate about the future of transportation in America.

I would like to touch on a few examples of services we think are successful. Amtrak just finished a year of record ridership. There are a number of great examples of the kind of growth we want to see, but I will confine myself to two that are geographically and demographically distinct, but that together give us a sense of how we hope the system of the future will look. The first is our Keystone Corridor between Harrisburg, Philadelphia, and New York City. Together with the Pennsylvania DOT, we put $145 million into much-needed improvements. This

allowed us to speed up trains to 110 mph, and we got more frequencies out of the same equipment. We restored electrified service in 2006, and our ridership grew by 20.1% in 2007. Our growth was so strong that last month a U.S. Airways carrier providing service between Harrisburg and LaGuardia cancelled its service on that route because it couldn't compete with Amtrak – the city center to city center access is a tremendous selling point, and a natural enhancer of connectivity.

Our partnership with California has also been a success. We have built a network of three major passenger rail corridors. Eight-six percent of the stations in California have some kind of intermodal connectivity and the result has been a very strong system built on the range of choices we can offer travelers – the Pacific Surfliner between San Luis Obispo, Los Angeles, and San Diego is our second largest corridor operation after the Northeast Corridor, and the Capitol Corridor between San Jose and Sacramento was one of the ten fastest growing corridors on the system last year, expanding ridership by 14.8%. California is an example of the growth and business we can get when we provide the traveler with a networked operation.

While our focus will be on corridors, my view is that there will always be a place for the long distance trains – they provide basic transportation to communities that lack transportation choices and they will continue to connect corridors – but I believe the real opportunity for growth lies in corridors a few hundred miles long that use shared rights of way to provide people a real transportation choice. We have some very real challenges, and the next few years are going to be important if we are going to meet them – in terms of our relations with the states, our

ability to procure new equipment so that we can grow our ridership, and in finding a more reliable source of funding so that we can develop and execute programs without trying to keep things moving under a continuing resolution.

With that in mind, I will comment on the bill. I think the timing is right; the national transportation crisis is upon us, and Congress and the nation will have to address it in the next couple of years. I think the Bill that has been introduced in the House is a strong statement of support, not just for Amtrak but for the cause of passenger rail service generally. I think the Committee recognizes certain basic realities, and the bill is a ringing endorsement of the need for corridor service. The authorization of a Federal-state partnership program is the single most important aspect of the bill. The 80-20 matching program will do a lot to level the modal playing field and help states to pursue passenger rail projects. The investment grants for congestion mitigation measures will also benefit many of our existing services. The increases in the authorization of funding levels are going to be essential if we are to realize these visionary proposals. We are seeing inflation in the costs of fuel, basic materials, and health care expenses, and these will directly translate into higher operating and capital costs.

As I mentioned in our FY 2009 grant request, I do not believe Amtrak will be able to comply with all of the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act by the July 26, 2010, deadline. Ownership and responsibility questions complicate compliance, since we don't own all of the 527 stations we serve, and in many cases we are responsible for altering parts of the station that we do not own. In addition, the question of whether DOT will implement its proposed new rules

regarding full length level boarding of trains from rail platforms is adding to the delay in achieving compliance. For these reasons, I would ask you to relieve us from the requirement to comply with the ADA by July 26, 2010, and I would recommend that the deadline for compliance be pushed out at least through the life of this reauthorization.

I want to close by thanking you for taking up this matter. While it is certainly vital for Amtrak, I think Amtrak is vital for the country. I look forward to working with you on a collaborative effort to develop our reauthorization, which will, I hope, become the first step toward a comprehensive, integrated, and balanced national ground transportation policy.