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SUBMITTED COMMENTS

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Before the
Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
United States House of Representatives

Regarding:
Benefits of Intercity Passenger Rail Service

Washington, D.C.
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Madam Chair and Subcommittee Members:

I am John Bohlinger, Lieutenant Governor of Montana. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the critical importance of Amtrak's intercity service to Montana and other rural states.

In my comments today I hope to dispel some misconceptions about the nature of Amtrak's long-distance intercity service that have a direct bearing on discussions regarding the need for continued federal support for Amtrak in general and long-distance routes specifically. I believe most people assume Amtrak's long-distance routes primarily serve vacationers and other leisure travelers. In reality, long-distance routes such as the Empire Builder provide essential transportation to residents of large areas of the US including Montana.

Since it's beginning in 1970, Amtrak has provided two basic types of service. Corridor service generally provides relatively short trips to commuters and other single-day travelers in heavily populated regions such as the Northeast. Long-distance service is generally defined as service on routes over 750 miles long that usually includes overnight accommodation. Long-distance service primarily serves through travelers and residents of less-populated areas. The current combined system of corridor and long-distance routes serves every state except Alaska, Hawaii, Wyoming, and South Dakota. As shown in Figure 1, Amtrak's 15 long-distance trains, which operate on 14 routes and provided over 3.7 million rides in 2006, provide the only passenger rail service in 23 of the 39 states they serve. Montana is one of these 23 states.

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Figure 1

Source: GAO, Corel (map).

The Empire Builder has provided critical service to Montana communities for 78 years. The nearly 700-mile segment of the Empire Builder route across Montana's Hi-Line accounts for one third of the total route, which begins in Chicago and ends in Seattle and Portland. To put this into national geographic perspective, the distance traveled by the Empire Builder across Montana is greater than the distance between Washington, DC and Atlanta, Georgia.

The Empire Builder provided nearly 500,000 rides in 2006 with over 150,000 boardings and alightings at Montana's 12 stations. These stations range from Whitefish, which is just west of Glacier National Park, to Havre, Glasgow, and Wolf Point, which are Eastern Montana communities in agricultural areas that produce a significant amount of the nation's export grain and other agricultural commodities. Eastern Montana is also experiencing increasing growth in oil and gas exploration activity that depends on reliable year-round transportation for workers.

The Empire Builder's ridership numbers are not large from a national perspective. However, as with our rural highway and transit systems, traffic volumes do not tell the whole story when it comes to understanding the national importance of long-distance passenger rail service.

To understand the importance of the Empire Builder you must first understand the nature of Montana's transportation system. In Northern Montana, which is the primary area served by the Empire Builder; our transportation system consists of one north-south Interstate Highway, one east-west two-lane highway, no intercity bus service, and limited access to scheduled air service. Especially during the winter, when highways are often closed due to extreme weather, the Empire Builder provides lifeline transportation to residents and businesses that have few other options.

As the only east-west passenger rail service between the US/Canadian border and Denver, the Empire Builder also draws riders from many other areas of Montana and other states. In Montana, residents of Missoula, Butte, Bozeman, and Billings routinely travel hundreds of miles to access the Empire Builder.

The Empire Builder provides economically important transportation for out-of-state visitors to and from Montana destination areas such as Glacier National Park, Whitefish Mountain Ski Resort and the Flathead Valley. However, if you were to visit a Montana train depot shortly before the Empire Builder arrives, as I have, you would see that most of the passengers waiting to board the train fall into the following categories:

- Montana residents traveling to hospitals in Seattle and Portland, or the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota for medical treatments,

- Military personnel and their families from Malmstrom Air Force Base in Great Falls,

- Native Americans from the five nearby Indian Reservations traveling to jobs or to visit family in other states,

- Homeland Security employees who staff the many border facilities along the US/Canadian border, and

- Students traveling to colleges in other states or returning home from Montana colleges.

These Empire Builder users are not the vacationers that some have characterized as the primary users of long-distance passenger rail service. They are Montana residents who rely on the Empire Builder for essential transportation.

It is difficult to quantify the full economic value of the Empire Builder service to Montana. However, based on a 2003 State of Montana study, the Empire Builder provides a minimum of $13 million in annual benefits to Montana's economy. Other states served by the Empire Builder experience similar benefits.

In the last few years, the Government Accountability Office and others have called for significant Amtrak reforms especially in the funding and management of long-distance routes. In Montana, we are generally pleased with the reforms that Amtrak has implemented in the last few years for the Empire Builder. These reforms, in addition to the affects of the increasing cost of gasoline, have resulted in a 39% increase in ridership since 2002.

One of the historic criticisms leveled against long-distance routes is their poor performance in comparison to corridor service. However, it is important to note that, unlike most corridor trains, almost all long-distance trains operate on rail lines owned and maintained by freight railroads. As these railroads struggle to cope with capacity problems associated with record freight volumes, it is remarkable that railroads such as BNSF have been able to maintain reasonable on-time performance records especially considering the length of the routes and the potential for delays caused by weather events.

From Montana's perspective, although additional Amtrak service and management improvements are necessary, the greatest need is a national passenger rail policy that includes long-distance routes with a multi-year federal funding package that supports it. Without such a policy, Amtrak is doomed to forever struggle to survive and provide basic services on all its routes. Once Congress establishes a policy that preserves existing passenger rail service, Amtrak can also consider restoring other routes it has dropped in the past such as the North Coast Hiawatha route that previously crossed Southern Montana. The majority of Montana's population lives along this route.

Finally, some recent Amtrak funding reform proposals include recommendations that states pick up more of the financial responsibility for the services they receive. Montana is opposed to requiring any state funding for long-distance routes because this would inevitably lead to the elimination of routes such as the Empire Builder. Expectations that all eight states served by the Empire Builder, including low-density states such as Montana, North Dakota, and Idaho, can contribute to picking up a share of the cost of the service are unrealistic. The population density in Montana is very low and the cost of a state match or contribution, per capita, would be significant and burdensome especially considering the high fuel taxes our residents already pay. Long-distance routes should therefore be excluded from any requirement that might be proposed for increased state funding participation, whether for operating or capital expenses.

In summary, Madam Chair, Amtrak's long-distance routes are an essential element of a passenger rail network that benefits the entire country. A national passenger rail system without long-distance routes is not a national passenger rail system. It is a disconnected and inefficient system that provides little or no national benefit.

We are certain that the Congress hears regularly that corridor passenger rail service offers national benefits including reduced emissions per passenger compared to car travel, transportation system redundancy, and alternatives to crowded highways and airports. Long-distance passenger rail routes such as the Empire Builder provide similar benefits as well as essential connectivity for citizens in rural states who have few transportation options. Accordingly, we are hopeful that the Congress will choose to continue to support Amtrak's long-distance service and in no way require financial contributions toward long-distance train service from low population density states.

This concludes my statement. Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in this important process. I would be glad to respond to questions from Committee members.