

Statement of

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Before the

Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials

The Honorable Corinne Brown, Chair

Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, U.S. House of Representatives

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Benefits of Intercity Passenger Rail

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Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear before your subcommittee, and thank you also for your strong advocacy of a national passenger rail system. The subject of today's hearing, benefits of intercity passenger rail, is of crucial importance. This statement first considers a series of specific benefits, and then editorializes on the difficulties of getting the rail passenger system that we need. The debate must change from "Amtrak, how much did you lose last year and what can you do to reduce federal funding?" to "What can you do to reduce our dependence on oil and further reduce carbon emissions, air and highway congestion and highway fatalities, and to increase safe mobility choices?"

I. A Travel Choice Americans Want

Our organization's mission is to promote "a modern, customer-focused national passenger train network that provides a travel choice Americans want." That Americans want this is reflected both in opinion polls and in record Amtrak ridership; *why* they want this is discussed in the next several sections. The most recent national poll was released February 8, 2006, by Harris under the heading "Americans Would Like to See a Larger Share of Passengers and Freight Going By Rail in Future" and is at http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=638

Clearly, it is good when a democracy produces something constituents want—something which coincidentally brings the many benefits enumerated below. I occasionally hear the

approving statement that “Amtrak is one of the few tangible things I get for my tax dollars.” A series of carrots and sticks will be required to enable us to keep the nation (and planet) strong and environmentally sound. Democracy tends to have an easier job producing carrots than sticks; intercity passenger rail is an important carrot.

II. Avoiding Stress and Congestion on Other Modes

This is partly self-evident, but—to be more specific—individuals have commented unfavorably on:

- the inability to move around in an airplane,
- cabin air quality when the planes are heavily loaded,
- ability to use medical equipment en route;
- ability to travel when flying is medically prohibited;
- fear of flying; and
- driving on Interstate highways increasingly clogged with big trucks.

III. Environmental impact

Congress is working hard in many areas to find ways to reduce our oil dependence and to significantly reduce carbon emissions. In 1973, the U.S. imported 35% of its oil; today that figure is over 60%. Still—in absolute terms, and far and away in per capita terms—the U.S. is the world’s largest contributor of CO2 emissions, putting 5,877 metric tons of CO2 into the atmosphere last year. Between 1990 and 2006, transportation CO2 emissions grew 25.4%, making a significant contribution to climate change.

Energy Intensity (British Thermal Units per passenger-mile), by mode, ranked from most to least efficient

Amtrak	2,709
Commuter Railroads	2,743
Rail transit	2,784
Certificated air carriers	3,264
Automobile	3,445
Light trucks (2-axle, 4-tire)	7,004
General aviation	10,384*

(*Data is for 2005 except that general aviation is for 2001.)

Source: Oak Ridge National Laboratory, *Transportation Energy Data Book, Edition 26*, first posted May 29, 2007. The *Data Book*, produced annually under contract to the U.S. Department of Energy, is at <http://cta.ornl.gov/data/download26.shtml> (see especially tables 2.12 and 2.13 in chapter 2). My detailed discussion is at http://www.narprail.org/cms/index.php/resources/more/oak_ridge_fuel/

The table above indicates that, on the basis of energy consumed per passenger-mile, automobiles and airlines, respectively, consume 27.2% and 20.5% more energy than does

Amtrak. Amtrak's showing is particularly impressive when one takes into account the investment neglect it has suffered relative to the other modes. Also, driving is even less efficient if the widespread use of light trucks as personal vehicles is considered—light trucks (two-axle, four tires) consumed 7,652 BTUs per vehicle mile in 2005, when the same measure for cars was only 5,409.

The numbers in the table actually understate rail's relevance because the statistics do not reflect important, if hard-to-quantify, externalities—rail's encouragement of pedestrian- and transit-friendly development which in turn encourages the construction of buildings that are more efficient to heat and cool. Also, for longer trips, it is relevant that automobile travelers consume energy at way-side hotels while comparable needs for train riders are reflected in the energy consumed by the train itself.

Considering the preceding paragraphs and table, imagine how much more environmentally benign our transportation system and our nation would be if we had invested heavily in rail—both passenger and freight—over the last 35 years instead of spending so much energy starving Amtrak and struggling over whether intercity passenger rail, or a good chunk of it, should even exist!

IV. Counteract the Isolation of Rural America.

Amtrak's national network increasingly serves communities that have lost intercity bus service and/or airline service. Other communities have either very limited bus service that goes in different directions than the train and/or very-high-fare and limited air service. Appendix I is a partial list of communities that have lost bus service since July, 2004.

V. Safety

The federal government in effect is spending \$40 billion a year to encourage more driving, even as 3,600 people a month die on the highways, and the aging of America means the number of people who could benefit from a convenient alternative to driving is steadily rising. To put it bluntly, more and more people ought not to be driving, and the presence of a modern, convenient passenger train network would make it easier for family and friends to coax such people out of their cars.

Automobile accidents are the leading cause of death for teen-agers. This also argues for developing the most robust possible set of alternatives to driving.

VI. Amtrak's Overnight Trains: Washington's Blind Spot

The nation needs more of every type of Amtrak service—Northeast Corridor, corridors elsewhere, and the national network. The need will become more apparent to more people as they realize what the long-term future holds for gasoline prices.

I made a quick round-trip to Chicago early last week and, on the return trip, had breakfast and lunch with one individual and one couple who were new converts to long-distance train travel; all three people were using the train to make long trips involving the use of two or three trains. (See Appendix II for their stories.) One was astounded when I said there are people in Washington who want to get rid of these trains. She immediately referred to gas prices.

When I got back to the office, and reviewed my notes from your June 12 Amtrak hearing, I read with dismay Amtrak Chairman David Laney's statement that, "We continue to have the challenge of the rationalization of the long-distance routes." In my long experience with this issue, "rationalization" translates as service reduction, which is exactly what Americans do not want. We have tried to convince Amtrak that, so long as there is no change in the size of the long-distance equipment fleet, Job One should be working to make the existing service run as reliably and as efficiently as possible. The benefits to be gained by discontinuing existing routes to add new ones—playing "route roulette" as I call it—simply aren't certain enough or valuable enough to justify putting existing revenue at risk.

Evidently, our message isn't sinking in. And, as Chairwoman Brown knows only too well, Amtrak has chosen to take advantage of Hurricane Katrina and the short-lived elimination of New Orleans-Mobile tracks to permanently eliminate service between New Orleans and Florida, visiting further hardship on Gulf Coast communities already suffering the continuing trauma of Katrina's unprecedented devastation.

All of this is reminiscent of the summer of 1979. Then, a Capitol Hill fight over which Amtrak routes to eliminate was unfolding during the gasoline availability crisis. The political cartoons were unforgiving—showing people unable to get gasoline alongside people waiting for trains that would never come. The message was clear: a political system that was unable to deliver gasoline was preparing to take away an obvious alternative to driving—the train. In the end, "only" 14% of Amtrak's route miles were eliminated, down from 43% targeted by the ever-hostile U.S. Department of Transportation. Today's cartoon would focus on the price of gasoline. Reference to the DOT prompts me to observe that David Laney overall has done a good job of keeping the national network intact under an Administration whose policies would eliminate intercity passenger trains in all but a few markets relevant to the travel needs of just a few Americans.

Nonetheless, the prospect of further route reductions, on top of those implemented in 1979, 1981 and 1997, brings expressions of disbelief from people riding the trains, and should alarm everyone who can influence policy. *We need more routes and more trains, not fewer routes and fewer trains!*

There is a cottage industry of analysts around in this town who reliably turn out reports critical of Amtrak's overnight trains, without even contacting our office (except perhaps by viewing our website) to get another viewpoint. These people generally have never

managed such trains, and either have never ridden them or have only limited experience riding them.

Here is one example of the misinformation that results. When he was DOT Inspector General, Kenneth Mead made faulty assumptions in arguing that fully 34% of all passengers on long-distance trains could be handled instead on state corridor trains. The table he developed, part of his October 2, 2003, testimony before a Senate committee, showed up again in the draft of a Government Accountability Office report late last year. The GAO's final report dropped the table, apparently in response to this in Amtrak President & CEO Alex Kummant's October 23, 2006, letter reviewing the draft report: "Appendix II of GAO's report also includes a table (p. 118) that quantifies the 'corridor ridership' on each long distance train based upon six-year old ridership data. Whatever definition of 'corridor' was used in calculating these numbers is inconsistent with GAO's definition of that term (p. 3), and produces facially illogical results. For example, the table indicates that all Auto Train passengers are 'corridor riders,' even though the two Auto Train terminals are 855 miles apart and any ultra high speed corridor service that might someday connect them would not likely accommodate automobiles."

This analysis also ignores the high share of passengers—including those described in Appendix II—making connections between or among two or more Amtrak trains. For example, a Detroit, MI-Grand Junction, CO, passenger would be reflected as a corridor rider on the Michigan train but obviously would not stick with Amtrak if the *California Zephyr* disappeared.

There is also a never-ending series of amendments aimed at reducing the size of Amtrak's network. Just last week, Rep. John Boozman (R-AR) offered and withdrew an amendment that would subject Amtrak's right of access to freight tracks to a route-by-route determination by U.S. DOT that Amtrak was not increasing energy consumption by delaying freight trains. Rep. Boozman said, "We don't need a passenger train with a handful of passengers delaying freight trains." He did not specifically say that Amtrak is operating such lightly-used trains, but that implication was obvious. The trains that would fit that description are long gone.

VII. A Complete Future Vision—The World is Changing Rapidly

In December, I was in a meeting where it was noted that, within about six months, U.K. public opinion had dramatically changed on the issue of climate change, taking it from "something to which people paid lip service to something that affects their daily lives." It has been impressive to see how quickly U.S. public opinion has followed, symbolized perhaps by the recent report in *The Hill* of major efforts by both Republicans and Democrats to make their national conventions "green" ("Both parties plan green conventions," June 15).

In watching this issue evolve over the past four decades, I have been struck by the gradual expansion of rail's role, even in the face of largely hostile public policy. And critics' myopia is not confined to the overnight trains. When I first came to Washington

in 1975, people could say with a straight face (and David Stockman did) that passenger trains' utility was pretty much confined to New York-Philadelphia. As recently as 1993, an American Bus Association official, quoted in Metro Magazine, said, "We don't need another big Amtrak subsidy to support a run from Boston to Portland, ME. There just aren't enough passengers...Buses do the job just fine. Amtrak subsidies are a terrible waste of scarce public money."

Today, Amtrak's *Downeaster* funded by the State of Maine is widely regarded as a huge success story—FY 2006 ridership 337,900, up 23% from FY 2005. What's more, we understand that intercity bus ridership in the same territory has increased, not fallen. This supports our longstanding theory that the interests of intercity bus and intercity passenger rail are parallel. Part of the explanation may lie with the attractive, intermodal terminal in Portland that Amtrak uses but which also has enhanced the image and visibility of Concord Trailways, Portland's major intercity bus operator. Also, there is cross-honoring of Concord Trailways and Amtrak tickets and this flexibility has encouraged some rail riders to use the bus in one direction.

Meanwhile, in California, "the automobile capital of the planet," the three state-supported Amtrak corridors accounted for 19.4% of Amtrak's Fiscal 2006 ridership. That's 4.7 million people and does not include those riding the four long-distance routes that serve California.

In sum, "straight-line" projections of change understate real change, and certainly understate the interest of U.S. travelers in expanding the rail choice.

Thank you for considering our views.

APPENDIX I. Greyhound stops dropped since July, 2004, in Amtrak-served communities

Alabama—Atmore*

California—Auburn, Davis, Irvine, Lompoc/Surf, Richmond,

Colorado—Fort Morgan, Winter Park, La Junta

Florida—Chipley*, Crestview*, two stops in Okeechobee, Palatka

Georgia—Atlanta Amtrak (multiple intermodal connections)

Maryland—Cumberland, Aberdeen

Minnesota—Detroit Lakes, Winona

Mississippi—Bay St. Louis*, Greenwood, Hazlehurst, Picayune, Yazoo City

Missouri—Warrensburg

Nebraska—Lincoln

New Jersey—Trenton

North Carolina—Hamlet

North Dakota—Grand Forks

Ohio—Cleveland Amtrak station (intermodal service to Columbus and Cincinnati)

Oklahoma—Purcell

Oregon—Albany, Chemult, Klamath Falls

South Carolina—Camden, Denmark, Yemassee
Tennessee—Dyersburg
Texas—Del Rio, Alpine
Vermont—St. Albans
Virginia—Culpeper, Staunton
Wisconsin—La Crosse

* To quote Amtrak’s current timetable, “The Sunset Limited service between Orlando and New Orleans has been suspended. Future service has not been determined.” See discussion in Section VI of testimony.

APPENDIX II. Two interviews with Amtrak passengers on June 19, 2007

(Real names not used.)

Janet from Dade City FL was on the return leg of a Jacksonville FL-Elyria OH round-trip in coach to visit family. She is an oiler, working in the engine rooms of military ships, and had just gone around the world with no shore time. She took the train because “I needed time to wind down, to think, to relax and look at the scenery and occasionally talk with friendly strangers.” So far, she really liked the trip. She first thought about taking the train when she heard from fellow sailors that, due to high air fares, the union hall in Jacksonville had begun requiring sailors to take the train to their ships in Charleston SC. She tried out the train from Jacksonville to Lakeland and liked it, so she booked the round trip to Elyria.

Mr. and Mrs. Jones are seniors from Charlotte NC. They flew to Seattle, took an Alaska cruise, and were going home on Amtrak (in sleeper—*Empire Builder* Seattle to Chicago, *Capitol Ltd.* to Washington, *Crescent* to Charlotte]. They really liked the train, especially the *Empire Builder*. Mr. Jones travels with oxygen, which he cannot use on the airplane. First flight to Houston went O.K., but he didn’t think he’d make it to Seattle. Fortunately, and unbeknownst to them in advance, the airline had oxygen for emergencies, including his. However, Mrs. Jones volunteered, “Whenever we travel from now on it will be by train.” They could not stand the stuffy air on the plane. He said, completely independent of his oxygen condition, when the plane fills up it, it becomes stuffy and unpleasant to breathe. He also said, “I didn’t realize Amtrak was so big...so many passengers.” [Their daughter and grand-daughter were spotting their car at the Charlotte station this afternoon so it would be there for them when they arrive in Charlotte in the middle of the night.]

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