

Testimony of Joan McDonald
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Commission

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U.S. House of Representatives
"The Federal Railroad Administration's High Speed and Intercity Passenger
Rail Program: Mistakes and Lessons Learned"
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Good Morning Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Rahall, and Members of the Committee. I am Joan McDonald, Commissioner of the New York State Department of Transportation and Chair of the Northeast Corridor Infrastructure and Operations Advisory Commission (Northeast Corridor Commission). I am pleased to have the opportunity to come before you today to discuss the Northeast Corridor.

The Northeast Corridor Commission is made up of 18 commissioners representing eight states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Department of Transportation, and Amtrak. Another five states, four freight railroads, and one commuter agency are represented on the Commission as non-voting representatives. While we each bring our own perspectives to the table, all of us agree that the Northeast Corridor and its connecting feeder services are a critical transportation asset and that the entire Northeast region's economic future is closely tied to the future of the Northeast Corridor. Each member of the Commission is committed to working cooperatively to improve the Corridor and achieve the goals that Congress has set in our enabling legislation.

The Northeast is the densest region in the nation and home to four of the ten largest metropolitan areas. This density has enabled incredible economic productivity with two percent of the nation's land area generating 20 percent of its gross domestic product. However, this density has also created significant transportation challenges for the region. Our highways, railways, and airways already exceed their capacity in many places and face major renewal needs as much of the region's transportation infrastructure is at or approaching the end of its useful life.

The Northeast corridor is one of the world's busiest and most complex rail corridors and serves as a critical transportation link in our region. Some 260 million commuter and intercity riders and an estimated 30 million ton miles of freight are moved over the Corridor each year by more than 2,200 daily trains.

But the service we have today is simply not enough to meet the future needs of our region and our nation. The Corridor is already congested in many locations and demand for rail service is growing. If the Northeast is to maintain and improve the levels of mobility that have supported this region's position as the nation's financial and political capital, the Northeast Corridor is going to have to play a larger role in moving people and freight in the future. This is due in part to the fact that rail has

an inherent advantage in densely populated regions due to its relative efficiency in moving large numbers of people over limited rights of way.

The increased role for rail also simply reflects the reality that adding significant capacity to any mode of transportation in this densely populated region will be very challenging. Each mode will have to augment its capacity in the coming decades. Doing nothing is not an option. Investments in the Northeast Corridor today will yield many decades of economic benefits to not just our region, but to the nation. The alternative is to see productivity, quality of life, international competitiveness, and economic growth all diminish.

In 2008, the I-95 Corridor Coalition released a report entitled, *“A 2040 Vision for the I-95 Coalition Region”*. The basic conclusion was that continuing a “business as usual” approach to transportation would lead to dire consequences. Recognizing the existing constraints to adding capacity to the region’s highway network, and in order to promote increased mobility and economic growth, more efficient land use, reduced energy consumption, and better quality of life, the report recommended that the region increase by 20 percent the ton miles carried by freight rail, triple transit ridership, and increase intercity rail ridership eight-fold.

Much work needs to be done if we are to achieve such targets and significantly increase intercity, commuter, and freight use throughout the Northeast Corridor. For much of its history the Northeast Corridor has suffered from underinvestment and we now face a considerable backlog in state of good repair needs that require billions of dollars of investments simply to maintain and improve the safety and reliability of the existing, heavily utilized services.

Recently, Amtrak worked with the states to develop a Northeast Corridor Master Plan that looked at the Corridor’s comprehensive needs through 2030. This process identified over 300 projects needed to reach a state of good repair, increase intercity and commuter capacity, and reduce trip times. Total capital requirements were estimated at \$52 billion over the next 20 years just to maintain reliable service for all users and keep up with moderate growth forecasts. Addressing capacity, high speed rail, and freight needs beyond 2030 will add substantially to that total.

The reality is that while the Northeast Corridor’s needs are significant, there is not a consensus long-term vision for the future of the Corridor or the Corridor’s role in helping meet the growing transportation needs of the Northeast region. This, in large part, is why the Commission was created. In recognition of both the importance of achieving a faster, higher-capacity and more reliable Northeast rail corridor and the inherent challenges of coordinating, financing, and implementing major system improvements that cross jurisdictional boundaries, Congress directed the Secretary of Transportation to create the Northeast Corridor Infrastructure and Operations Advisory Commission.

The charge of the Commission, as we see it, is to bring together diverse interests, identify shared objectives, develop a unified long-term vision for the corridor, establish consensus on a plan to secure the federal, state, local and private investments needed to implement the vision, and provide a centralized source of information about the Northeast Corridor. The expectation is that by coming together to coordinate these activities, the states, Amtrak, and the federal government can achieve a level of success that far exceeds the potential reach of any individual organization or entity.

Critical to the process of developing such a vision will be the Passenger Rail Corridor Investment Plan being led by the Federal Railroad Administration in cooperation with the Commission, the Northeast states, and Amtrak. This planning effort will include a Tier I Environmental Impact Statement and a Service Development Plan to support a decision on the vision and implementation of a major investment in the Northeast Corridor.

This critical study will help us analyze alternatives and define a long-range vision for faster, more reliable, and more frequent intercity and commuter rail service, as well as expanded capacity for improved freight service.

Key inputs into this process will be the work Amtrak is now undertaking to develop a proposal for Next Generation High Speed Rail service in the Corridor and the ongoing efforts to update the Master Plan. The process of developing a Passenger Rail Corridor Investment Plan will allow us to delve much deeper into the costs, benefits, and broad impacts of various proposed alternatives.

There is no doubt that the Northeast is a compelling market for high-speed rail service. The size and densities of the Northeast's metropolitan regions compare favorably to regions in other nations that have successfully implemented high-speed rail. In fact, Amtrak's existing rail service already serves well over 50 percent of the air-rail markets between Washington and New York and New York and Boston. The existing capacity constraints on our highway and aviation systems make a greater reliance on our rail corridor a necessity. The question is, what is the right path forward and how do we fund it?

My intention is that the Commission's approach to developing a long-term vision for the Corridor be cooperative, fact-based, and non-ideological. We will look to do what is best for the long-term economic growth of the Northeast region and will seek opportunities to partner with the private sector while ensuring that the public interest and public resources are protected. We hope our work can serve as a model of multi-state cooperation for other corridors throughout the country.

However, while we are undertaking this longer-term visioning and planning process, there are significant funding needs in the short-term simply to maintain existing rail service.

I have mentioned the backlog in state of good repair needs and the history of underinvestment in the Corridor. On the positive side, we have seen some modest progress in recent years due to Amtrak's receiving more consistent capital appropriations levels and added funding from the economic recovery bill and the high-speed rail program.

While we no doubt could have used more funds, the NEC benefited from the \$1.3 billion in capital funds appropriated to Amtrak in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and another approximately \$1 billion in high-speed rail program grants from the FRA for projects on the NEC main line between Boston and Washington. In addition, Northeast states received almost \$700 million in grants for connecting rail corridors.

In my home state of New York, under the leadership of Governor Cuomo, we are preparing to construct a new grade-separated "flyover" at Harold Interlocking, where Amtrak, New Jersey Transit, and Long Island Rail Road trains converge north of Penn Station New York at the busiest junction on the Northeast Corridor. The \$368 million removal of this bottleneck is funded in part with a recently awarded \$295 million high-speed rail grant.

In addition, with the support of \$83 million in "TIGER" grant funds, New York, in partnership with Amtrak and private developers, is in the early stages of construction of \$267 million of improvements to passenger access under what is planned to be a new "Moynihan Station" on the site of the former Farley Post Office adjacent to the existing Penn Station, the busiest rail station in the country.

New York is also preparing to implement additional projects totaling over \$250 million to improve reliability, comfort, speed and capacity on our Empire Service route between New York City, Albany, and Niagara Falls.

These funds are creating good construction and engineering jobs and helping improve rail service in the Northeast. One of my short-term goals as chair of the Northeast Corridor Commission is to facilitate close cooperation between the FRA, the states, and Amtrak to ensure that these projects move forward as quickly as possible.

However, despite the importance of the funding we have received for these projects, much more is needed. The Commission has created a number of committees to advance our efforts, including an Infrastructure and Operations Committee that is working on identifying priority projects that need to move forward as soon as possible regardless of the longer-term proposal that we put forward. These projects include replacing bridges and tunnels that average more than a century in service, including the Portal Bridge in New Jersey; Susquehanna, Gunpowder, and Bush River bridges in Maryland; the Connecticut River Bridge, and the Reconstruction era B & P tunnel in Baltimore. The Portal and Susquehanna Bridges, and the B&P Tunnel replacement, are moving forward in environmental review and design

phases with high-speed rail grant funds, but funds for construction have not yet been identified.

New York's Penn Station is operating at capacity today, and additional track, platform, and station capacity will be needed to accommodate any growth beyond current levels of service. This includes new trans-Hudson tunnels, as proposed under the "Gateway" program, and completion of Moynihan Station. The combination of these two projects will better serve passengers, help relieve extreme overcrowding in the existing Penn Station, and add capacity for commuter and intercity service, including potential future high-speed rail service.

The Commission expects to have a preliminary report to Congress identifying these and other priority projects along the Corridor this spring.

Speaking on behalf of my fellow commissioners, we certainly appreciate this committee's strong support for the Northeast Corridor and look forward to working with you as we develop a long-term plan for the future. A strong federal partnership is essential for our success. Let me assure you that the Commission is dedicated to our task ahead and intends to work expeditiously with Congress and the key stakeholders to advance the short and long-term needs of the Northeast Corridor in a way that brings maximum benefit to the region and to the entire nation.

Thank you for your leadership and support and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.