

News from the

National Association of Railroad Passengers

www.nartrail.org

December 1998

11
Vol. 32

FY 1999 Appropriations: Amtrak's "Two-Thirds" Victory

Amtrak did well in the Fiscal 1999 bill covering appropriations for "Department of Transportation and Related Agencies," enacted as part of a larger omnibus spending bill (Public Law 105-277, passed by the House October 20, the Senate October 21, and signed by President Clinton October 21). Amtrak got the \$609 million it sought. [High-speed rail programs got \$20.5 million.] However, Amtrak got only a partial victory on broadening the eligible uses of capital funds (the so-called "transit definition")—they can be used for maintenance of equipment, but not maintenance of way.

The definition debate was triggered by Clinton's 1999 budget, which proposed a premature end to Amtrak federal operating grants. The Administration later supported the definitional change, which Amtrak said was vital to its survival.

It now appears that Amtrak will survive the current fiscal year (i.e., through September 30, 1999), but the need for full flexibility will intensify in the future.

House-Senate conferees on the DOT appropriations bill also knocked out language supported by Senator Richard Shelby (R-AL) that would have required Amtrak tickets to show the corporation's average per-passenger subsidy. Also killed was language imposing similar requirements for aviation and

highways, and supported by Senators Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) and John Kerry (D-MA) in response to Shelby's effort.

Separately, the bill included \$450,000 for the Amtrak Reform Council (in addition to its original \$50,000) but prohibited use of those funds for consultants. This prompted New Jersey Gov. Christine Todd Whitman (R), the Council's chair, to resign from the Council on November 6. House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) appointed her, but the incoming Speaker, Bob Livingston (R-LA), likely will appoint her successor. The freight railroad industry is urging the Speaker to appoint William H. Dempsey, who was president of the Association of American Railroads 1977-1992. Senate confirmation is not required.

The other flexibility—that of states to use some of their federal TEA-21 funding on intercity passenger rail—was extended to Vermont by the omnibus bill. (A Senate TEA-21 provision giving this to *all* states was knocked out in conference.)

Conference report language urges Amtrak to work with Vermont and the New England Central Railroad to upgrade the signal system between Brattleboro and White River Junction. Amtrak is requested to report to Congress by March 1 on extending the Northeast Corridor to Richmond. ■

TEST OF NEW GRADE CROSSING TECHNOLOGY IN CONNECTICUT

An experimental, high-tech grade crossing system began operation July 20 at the School Street crossing (right), West Mystic, CT, on Amtrak's Northeast Corridor. Formal dedication was August 26.

The new crossing features four crossing-gate arms, meant to keep cars from going around the usual configuration of two arms (on the right side of the road only). As a train approaches (passenger trains up to 70 mph, freights 50 mph), the gates are lowered and the bells and red flashing lights activated. At the same time, sensor coils (buried in the pavement between the gates) check for the presence of motor vehicles in the crossing. If clear, the gates are lowered after seven seconds, and an "all-clear" signal is relayed to the train; otherwise, a warning signal is sent to the train with enough time for it to stop before reaching the crossing.

There is also a camera monitor watching the crossing (in the photo, visible on the shorter utility pole, left of center—note also the new catenary poles and wire).

A few crossings were found impractical to eliminate as part of the New Haven-Boston electrification project. The Federal Railroad Administration contributed \$800,000 and Connecticut DOT \$200,000, toward the School St. test. Programming and design were performed by Rail-



—Federal Railroad Administration

way Systems Design, Inc., Union Switch & Signal, and Amtrak. Similar crossings are used in areas of 125-mph operation on the route of the X2000 in Sweden (Sept. '93 News).

NARP PRESENTATION AT BERLIN CONGRESS

NARP Executive Director Ross B. Capon spoke (right) at "Eurailspeed 98," Berlin, October 30. At this third "World Congress on High Speed Rail," Capon was on a "Customers' Wishes and Priorities" panel, moderated by Charles Fleming of *The Wall Street Journal*. The three other panelists were Capon's German passenger-group counterpart and customer-relations executives from the French and Italian national railways. The triennial Congress is sponsored primarily by European railways and suppliers. Federal Railroad Administrator Jolene Molitoris, another speaker, said there were over 60 U.S. registrants this year, up from 12 at the last conference (Lille, 1995).



—Michael Testerman

BIG OIL IMPORTS, BIG TRADE DEFICIT

"While worries mount over trade deficits and Asia's currency crisis, Americans have forgotten about their biggest trade and security problem—U.S. dependence on foreign oil. "When the country was first stranded by Arab oil embargoes 25 years ago, the United States imported about 35% of its oil. It imports more than 53% now..."

"Instead of conserving, Americans have gone on a gas-burning binge...The market share of sport utility vehicles has doubled in just five years. The collective fuel economy of light trucks made by the Big Three car companies has actually dropped..."

"Currency crises come and go, but oil imports have lasted for decades as a solid and seemingly immovable base of the trade deficit. [Oil imports] 'certainly [are] bigger than anything contributed by Asia,' said Cynthia Latta, principal U.S. economist at DRI/McGraw-Hill Inc. in Lexington, Mass. Petroleum is the country's largest import, costing \$71.1 billion a year.

"In the recent past, some economic woes have clearly worsened while the U.S. has loaded up on cheap oil. Russia...has been hit by both the currency crisis and plunging oil revenue. Ultimately, Western nations have had to come to the rescue with billions of dollars in aid.

"Many oil producers are no better off...As single source economies, they are likely to hit the skids when world oil prices drop...They are also markets for U.S. goods, almost guaranteeing that there will be aftershocks of the crisis over Asia and trade deficits..."

"If oil trade is more likely to support the production of high-value goods for export here than the creation of consumer markets in oil producing countries, there is bound to be trouble. Foreign oil is a good deal for America. But if neither Asia nor the oil producers can afford U.S. exports, who can?"

—Michael S. Lelyveld, *Journal of Commerce* feature story, August 14

AMTRAK COMPUTERIZES FOOD SERVICE

Better service, lower costs!

A dream combination that sounds too good to be true, yet Amtrak says it will result from two computer systems expected to be fully operational nationwide by next summer: "point of sale" and "EATEC."

Improved service should be most obvious in cafe and lounge cars, where late openings and early closures to accommodate a manual inventory process (with much paperwork) frustrate passengers and reduce food revenues.

(See also Food Service Hours in Travelers' Advisory.)

With point-of-sale, food service staff will make a computer entry each time an item is ordered. Within hours after a train reaches its destination (rather than 30 days later, as at present), Amtrak managers will see what items sold and when. This should let Amtrak do a much better job of avoiding run-outs and spoilage. Food revenues, customer satisfaction and crew morale should improve.

"EATEC" will be less obvious to customers but, says Amtrak, will reduce paperwork and otherwise streamline Amtrak's food purchasing process.

By mid-November, installation of the systems and training of personnel already was underway, and "point-of-sale" was in place on a few Northeast Corridor trains.

UN-HAPPY BIRTHDAY IN ST. LOUIS



—Scott Leonard

The "St. Louis Union Trailers," a "temporary" facility opened by Amtrak when it vacated a badly deteriorated Union Station, became 20 years old on October 31. Efforts in the 1980's to move Amtrak back into a part of the grandly refurbished Union Station were unsuccessful, and the trailers remained (shown above in 1990, before a more recent remodeling), in the shadow of the elevated US 40/I-64 freeway.

Former NARP Assistant Director and St. Louis native Barry Williams told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (October 26), "This is the first impression that a lot of passengers have...There is no way St. Louis would allow airline passengers to put up with a makeshift, ad hoc facility out there for many years."

But the future looks more promising. Design work on a new transportation center is half complete. Construction could start in the spring and take two years. It will tie together Amtrak, Greyhound (itself in a "temporary" facility since 1992), MetroLink light rail (by expanding the nearby Kiel Center station), and Bi-State local buses. Then St. Louis again should have a terminal that says, "Welcome," not, "Move along."

Amtrak Changes Travel Agent Policies

Amtrak announced on October 9 that, effective November 1, most travel agent commissions would drop from 10% to 5%, and said it would "increase its tour incentive to as much as 15% [from 12%, for Amtrak Vacations] based on sales performance. At the same time, Amtrak is increasing its investments in travel agents support services, and in the quality and consistency of its passenger train products, a move travel agents have been requesting" (from Amtrak release).

Amtrak said, "The proportion of Amtrak tickets sold through travel agencies has gone down, from 40% of sales before 1995 to 29% this year...Fiscal 1998 versus fiscal 1997 marked a turn to an absolute dollar reduction in gross travel agency sales, down 6% to \$313 million." The decline occurred while Amtrak sales through all other channels grew and "despite Amtrak's decision last year to maintain commissions at 10% across-the-board, two percent higher than the airlines. Amtrak also never imposed commission caps (limits on commissions) as was done by the airlines in 1995."

Amtrak is continuing 10% commissions on groups and providing net fares to qualified tour operators, in an effort to reward agents for bringing business to Amtrak that Amtrak likely would not have gotten otherwise. (Amtrak says it is looking for more ways to do this.) To some agents this gesture rings hollow due to Amtrak's stiff group definition (20, up from 15).

Travel Agent magazine editorialized November 2: "At least, unlike the airlines, [Amtrak] offered what it considered a valid motivation. Agents were falling behind in bookings...While the airlines never offered convincing arguments for cutting commissions during a period of soaring profits, Amtrak defended its action in detail." Amtrak Vice President-Customer Relationships and Revenue Anne Hoey and Assistant Vice President-Sales Kathleen Gordon held an October 15 news conference at the ASTA [American Society of Travel Agents] World Congress in Los Angeles. They went to the Congress to explain policy face-to-face and to assure agents Amtrak is not abandoning them. Amtrak had more staff than ever before at its trade show booth. Agents are furious anyway.

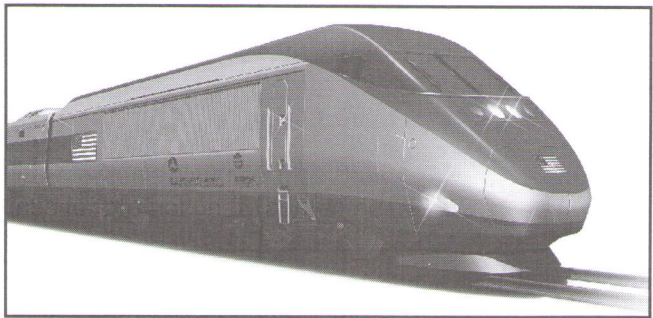
Hoey thinks Amtrak's reservations system investments mean customers who formerly sought agents after waiting too long or getting busy signals now get good service at 1-800-USA-RAIL. Internet sales also are growing. Like other companies, Amtrak prefers direct customer relationships.

In related moves, Amtrak on January 16 will shrink its sales force, whose primary job is to support travel agents, and close its three downtown ticket offices (two in Manhattan, one in Washington). Also closing January 16 is the ticket office in

AT LAST, A TEXAS PASSENGER GROUP!

A Texas Association of Railroad Passengers was formally organized at a meeting November 14 in Dallas. Attendees elected NARP Region 9 Director Tim Geeslin of Arlington president. About 80 people attended the meeting, including NARP President John R. Martin, one of the speakers. The group contact is Tim Geeslin, 2205 Marvin Gardens, Arlington, TX 76011, 817/792-3833, <geeslin@arlington.net>. The new group is extremely welcome, as Texas was for far too long the biggest state without an "ARP."

PACT TO DEVELOP 150-MPH ENGINE



—Bombardier Transit Corporation

The Federal Railroad Administration and Bombardier Transit Corporation have agreed on production, by 2000, of a prototype fossil-fuel high-speed locomotive. This was announced at an October 8 ceremony at Washington Union Station. Federal Railroad Administrator Jolene Molitoris said, "We knew if we wanted to take high-speed technology from the Northeast to the rest of the country, we would need a technology that did not require the electrification that has been necessary until now."

The agreement calls for development of a 4000-horsepower, 100-ton locomotive, capable of 150 mph. It will use an Allied Signal TF-40 turbine. In later phases of the project, the locomotive's performance will be enhanced with energy from a flywheel storage system being developed by the FRA-funded Advanced Locomotive Propulsion System project (led by the Center for Electromechanics at the University of Texas, Austin).

the Department of Transportation headquarters, where business fell after the Federal Railroad Administration relocated and federal policy directed business to a new, on-site travel agency. Amtrak is keeping its office in the U.S. Capitol.

Some agents fear airlines will copy Amtrak, but airline analyst Michael Boyd said, "I don't think the airlines care about what Amtrak does. The airlines are going to cut travel agents out of the picture as soon as they can, next month, next year, or four or five years from now" (*Travel Agent*).

Travel agents who slapped service charges on Amtrak transactions while Amtrak paid the industry's richest commissions may be getting what they deserve. But time will tell whether Amtrak is striding successfully into a bold, new world of travel sales or will have to backtrack because Amtrak (especially for long distance trips) has a greater need than the airlines for promotion by *contented* travel agents. ■

NARP FILES UNION PACIFIC COMMENTS

The Surface Transportation Board recently sought comments on proposed "remedial conditions" various parties advocated to address rail service problems in Texas. NARP's concern is "seeing that Union Pacific can begin to reasonably fulfill its contractual and statutory obligations to provide reliable handling of Amtrak trains. We also want to see the rail freight business run well and prosper."

NARP approvingly noted several track capacity improvements Union Pacific has proposed, suggesting that the STB consider holding Union Pacific to those commitments if (as some expect) the STB does not grant various rights requested by other railroads. NARP's statement, filed in "Sub-No. 26, Houston/Gulf Coast Oversight Proceeding," is available on request.

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

More news from October 25 Amtrak timetable

- The southern San Diegan corridor has a new, mid-day, 11th frequency.
- Capitol Corridor has a fifth frequency between Sacramento and Oakland.
- Dining (but not cafe) service ended on the Seattle-Eugene *Cascade* (not reflected in the timetable).
- *Coast Starlight* schedule is 0:25 slower southbound and 0:50 slower northbound.
- *Empire Builder* leaves Chicago 0:45 earlier (2:15 pm). Tighter connection from *Texas Eagle* means fewer van trips, more rides to Chicago (Oct. Advisory; some *Eagle* misconnects are put on Greyhound at Chicago).
- Westbound *California Zephyr* is 0:30 slower, but the eastbound train 0:45 faster.
- *Southwest Chief* runs 0:55 slower westbound (depart Chicago 3:45 pm), 1:15 slower eastbound (depart Los Angeles 7:15 pm, arrive Chicago 4:00 pm), due to mail handling at Winslow, AZ, and temporary signal work in Arizona and New Mexico. Amtrak now sells a long, 7:55 "connection" at Kansas City to train 306 for St. Louis. The good connection to train 304 (for St. Louis and Springfield/Bloomington) is cut from 0:51 to 0:45—you might still make it, but Amtrak won't sell it in advance and the St. Louis trains now are all reserved.
- Eastbound *Wolverine* runs 1:20 earlier (depart Chicago 7:00 am).
- *City of New Orleans* no longer stops at Rantoul, IL (Illini still does).
- *Capitol Limited* is 0:15 faster; but eastbound leaves Chicago 0:55 later (8:15 pm), arrives Washington 0:40 later (3:00 pm). Though necessary for western connections, it's a far cry from the train of 1993 that had plenty of time for dinner out of Chicago (now a single-seating "light meal"), and a.m. Washington arrival.
- Conversely, eastbound *Lake Shore Limited* leaves Chicago 0:45 earlier (7:30 pm).
- The New York-Pittsburgh *Pennsylvanian* became a

Philadelphia-Chicago "day" train November 7. A Thruway bus (not in new timetable) links Detroit, Dearborn, Ann Arbor, and Jackson, MI to *Pennsylvanian* at Toledo. NARP has requested a Chicago departure of 6:30 am (vs. 6:00, for better Metra connections, general marketability). *Pennsylvanian* lacks Eastern connections, so *Three Rivers* now is the only link between New York City/New Jersey and Lewistown-Pittsburgh points.

- A new Keystone train runs near the old times of the *Pennsylvanian* between New York and Harrisburg.
- Empire Corridor *Mohawk* restored to daily service (except Sunday eastbound), bringing the Syracuse-Buffalo segment back up to four round-trips daily.

Food service hours: Amtrak's October 25 National Timetable at page 6 lists specific dining-car meal hours and says long-distance Lounge Cars "in most cases will be open from 6:00 am until midnight."

Stations: Amtrak began serving the new Syracuse (NY) intermodal station November 17...Checked baggage service at Joliet (IL) ended October 30.

Thruways: A weekend bus connects with the *Adirondack* to and from the south at Westport to Lake Placid (NY), November 27-March 21. Connections to and from the north are possible, with a longer wait.

Salt Lake City-Pocatello-Idaho Falls starts December 1, connecting with *California Zephyr* to and from west (taxi transfer required; Amtrak will reimburse).

Atlanta-Chattanooga-Nashville starts January 12, connecting with *Crescent* to and from north (transfer provided)...The same day, the current Atlanta-Columbus-Montgomery bus will be replaced with Atlanta-Columbus and Atlanta-Montgomery-Mobile buses.

Transit: The Altamont Commuter Express commuter rail service began operation October 19 Stockton (ex-SP station, not ex-Santa Fe Amtrak station)-Livermore-San Jose (Amtrak/Caltrain station), 85 miles.

Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority restored commuter rail service between Ipswich and Newburyport (8.7 mi.), October 26.



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Vol. 32, No. 11  December 1998



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News from the National Association of Railroad Passengers (ISSN 0739-3490), is published monthly except November by NARP; 900 Second Street, NE, Suite 308; Washington, DC 20002-3557; (202) 408-8362, fax (202) 408-8287, e-mail narp@narpmail.org, web www.narpmail.org. ©1998 National Association of Railroad Passengers. All rights reserved. Membership dues are \$24/year (\$12 under 21 or over 65) of which \$5 is for a subscription to NARP News. For the latest passenger rail news, call the NARP Hotline: 1-900-988-RAIL (\$1.20 per minute, most messages last 4 minutes; service available 24 hours a day; callers under 18 must have parental permission to use this service; updated at least every Friday PM).

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(This has news through Nov. 23. Vol 32, No. 10 was mailed Oct. 19.)

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