

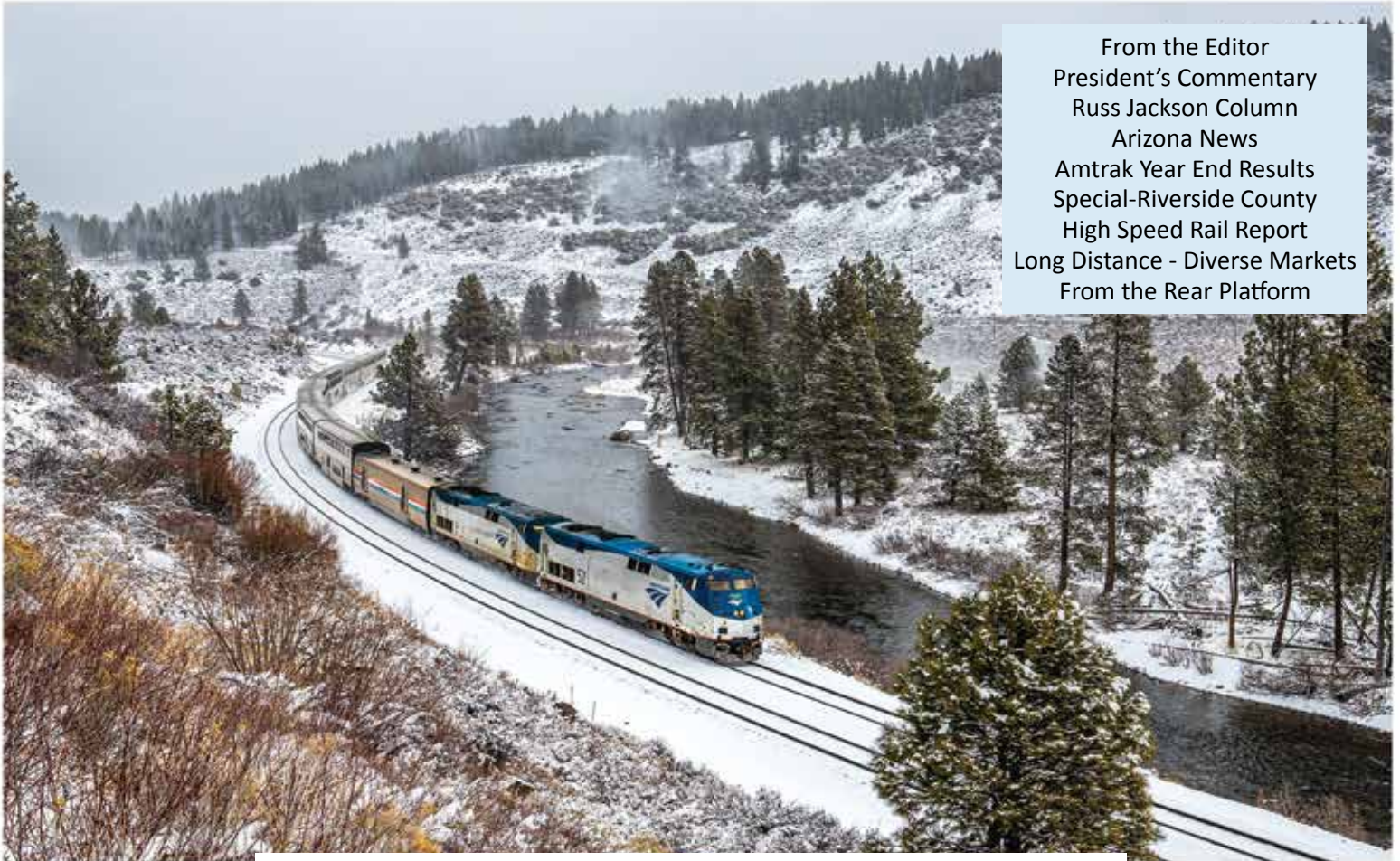
# STEEL WHEELS

PASSENGER RAIL IN CALIFORNIA AND THE WEST

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From the Editor  
President's Commentary  
Russ Jackson Column  
Arizona News  
Amtrak Year End Results  
Special-Riverside County  
High Speed Rail Report  
Long Distance - Diverse Markets  
From the Rear Platform

Chris Mohs. California Zephyr passes through Truckee CA, March 1, 2020



4th QUARTER 2020

PUBLICATION OF THE



RAIL PASSENGER ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA & NEVADA

## From the Editor's Desk

by Paul Dyson, Editor



2020 is drawing to a close and it's been a bumpy ride for just about everyone. My wife and I are lucky in that we do not have to leave the house to work or to take care of others. In fact we've both worked from home for many years so we are used to getting under each other's feet. I hope our staying at home has helped in a small way to stop the spread of the virus. I've taken one round trip train ride since February, all the way from Burbank to Los Angeles and back. Candidly, it's depressing what is happening to public transportation. Ironically, those services that do the best job by having a high farebox recovery are suffering the most. If your agency exists mostly on subsidies then, at least until the fed printing press stops, you have money to keep the lights on.

Where does that leave RailPAC in 2021? We are in a strong position to continue to influence national, state and local policy. We had a small but successful internet annual meeting with an inspiring presentation from Dan Leavitt about Ace, the San Joaquins and High Speed Rail. Our website has the link. We have added two board members, Robert Frampton of Pasadena and Simon Oh of Campbell. I have technically

stepped down from the Board but remain an officer. The meeting was kind enough to recognize my forty years with RailPAC and voted me President Emeritus. Noel Braymer was similarly recognized; he in fact has at least a year seniority over me, and he recruited me! Our faithful Secretary and Treasurer, Marcus Jung, reported a small surplus for the year and a strong bank balance to finance our activities into the coming year.

RailPAC's strength is you, our members. Whether you are simply a dues payer or whether you do more by actively campaigning, emailing, letter writing, you are valuable and add weight to our efforts. We have always relied on face to face contact and attendance at meetings to get our points across, and this year has been frustrating as offices are closed and meetings go online. You don't bump into anyone in the hallway on Zoom. All the more reason for YOU to keep in touch with your elected representatives and make sure they know that there is support for passenger rail, and that it is good investment for post Covid-19 USA.

We all owe a huge debt, not just to the health care professionals, although they are foremost in our thoughts. Don't forget the people who show up everyday to harvest the crops, put food on your table, pick up the trash, operate the buses and trains, and do all those essential jobs at some level of risk to themselves. Don't hold back, be free with smiles and "thank yous" for what they do.

Best wishes to you all for a much better new year.

Paul Dyson, Editor



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# President's Commentary

By Steve Roberts – RailPAC President

Well the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter is not the best of times. Because Congress could not come to agreement regarding Amtrak's funding (both regular FY21 and FY21 Supplemental) all the long-distance trains are tri-weekly. In addition the lack of a third

recovery act means commuter rail and transit systems are facing drastic cutbacks due to the lack of revenues. The virus incidence is growing nationwide but especially in the Midwest. States are re-imposing quarantines and the recommendation is to avoid holiday travel. This is not good news for those of us who follow the travel industry. Amtrak's strategy is one of minimizing consists to limit costs while using the resulting high load factors from limited capacity to maximize yield. This is a conservative, low risk strategy to minimize overall losses and cash flow but not the one that rail advocates would have chosen. We would have taken the risk and added more capacity to fully accommodate demand. However with the stratospheric rise in Covid-19 cases, especially in the rural states, shutdowns and calls to avoid travel, Amtrak might be right. Recent snapshots of demand from observers still show demand for the capacity that is out there, but as I write this the jury is still out because the virus trends seem to be worsening.

One change that would increase capacity but retain the smaller lower cost consists (and improve financial results) would be the end of the 50% capacity limit. All of the airlines are now moving toward eliminating the blocking of the middle seat. Beyond revenues their reasons have not been stated. It does appear that air filtration, outdoor air exchange and universal mask wearing have resulted in a very low risk of virus transmission on airplanes (both those selling all seats and those blocking seats). This also seems to apply on transit. Does that metric also apply to intercity trains? Have the airlines discovered that blocking seats does not impact carrier choice among customers? Is Amtrak's 50% capacity limit actually generating a significant traffic shift to Amtrak? Or are travelers for whom that might be a consideration just staying

home because travel transmission risk is more than just the airline or train journey? All unknowns but they are factors in carrier decision making.

The election has happened, removing one unknown, and we have at least two likely vaccines moving into distribution so maybe there is a light at the end of what is now a very dark tunnel. However, there is a strong chance that the government will be divided between parties and Republicans are telegraphing that "fiscal prudence" will be their key priority. As a result any initiative for a large-scale investment in rail will be tempered. Despite the Biden's Administration's positive view of rail, it will have a lot of priorities demanding attention; mitigation of Covid-19, the herculean task of distributing the vaccine, a divided government, the soft economy, the next natural disaster and of course any international crises.

That said infrastructure investment has bi-partisan support but up to this point there has not been a willingness to raise the funds to pay for any program. Over the years there has also been talk of an infrastructure bank, but the financial details are complex. Is this the time? Otherwise investment in high-speed rail and the Northeast Corridor, beyond state-of good-repair, could be limited.

However, there is bipartisan support for Amtrak and the long-distance trains. With no big rail investment initiative likely, that support will have to come through the regular appropriation process. There may be support in both houses and White House for the level of rail funding outlined in July's House 2021 Amtrak appropriation. That measure would fund daily service on the long-distance trains and provide significant capital spending to replace life expired equipment. Also on the docket is the reauthorization of the surface transportation act.

So as you can see it is still important that readers contact their Senators and Members of Congress (by email and phone) and encourage them to support full FY21 operating and capital funding for Amtrak with supplemental funding and language mandating daily service on the long-distance routes. Your message is like a vote, so do it today!

**WANTED: Photographers for Steel Wheels**  
*If you have a collection of hi-res jpeg photos, especially of passenger trains in California, or enjoy taking them, contact the Editor,*  
 pdyson@railpac.org

**Don't forget to check your subscription expiration date on the mailing label and renew your membership if it is due.**

**Thank you for your continued support for RailPAC and passenger rail.**

# Amtrak in November... What's Going To Happen Now?

Commentary by Russ Jackson – Editor Emeritus

Here we are in November, 2020. Covid 19 is still spreading across the country, the election is over (although the hoorah continues), the Congress has done nothing about the needs of the country since early in the year, and of more interest to readers here, Amtrak began Tri-weekly service on all of its western long distance trains in October as they planned all along. Despite the unified effort of rail advocates and a massive communications campaign directed toward the Congress and the press, we lost. It's as simple as that. You know the details of what has been done, so now we are faced with what comes next, for us as advocates and for the Congress. The Congress held hearings recently in which several important members took on Amtrak CEO William Flynn on the subject of national train service. Mr. Flynn stated, as they have said since June, "Our goal is to restore daily service on these routes as demand warrants, potentially by the summer of 2021." Can we believe him? In a letter to President-elect Biden Flynn said that restoration of full service was one of their goals. Were we justified in saying that by the time the new administration takes over and the Congress is back in session thinking of something other than the election, that the Amtrak national system will have deteriorated to the point where its data as Amtrak says it to be shows the criteria for restoration are not justified? I'm afraid so.



*Southwest Chief heads down Cajon with a short consist -  
Matthew Griffin*

Andrew Selden, URPA President, has been outspoken on this issue and as always is worth quoting: "Flynn manifests no awareness whatsoever that 'ridership' is largely irrelevant as an index of performance by an intercity passenger carrier. No airline measures or reports its 'ridership.' The correct metric is revenue passenger miles. Flynn never mentions that. In the period April-September, 2020, the inter-regional (long distance) trains produced more RPMs and revenue than all of Amtrak's other trains COMBINED! Does Flynn know that?" Does he care? Obviously not, as in all of the published pronouncements all that is mentioned is the combined figures for the whole



*Sunset Limited heads east out of Colton - Charles Freericks*

corporation, lumping the NEC and the State Corridors in with the long distance trains which makes them look as bad as the other two which have had huge drops in "ridership" and "revenue." Anyone watching the arrivals and departures on the VirtualRail web cameras across the country can see that passengers are there just like they were before October 1. RailPAC discovered that on one August night at Los Angeles Union Station Train 2, the Sunset Limited/Texas Eagle would depart with 184 in Coaches, and 49 in Sleeping Cars. Train 4, the *Southwest Chief*, would have 153 in Coaches and 35 in Sleepers. And, the Coast Starlight departed that day with 244 in the Coaches and 50 in the Sleepers. That was in August. Since October 1 the number of trains have been cut by 4/7ths. If the trains were doing that well in August what was the justification for Tri-Weekly? Bob Johnston, the top passenger train writer for Trains Magazine, wrote on October 9 that "A Trains News Wire analysis of October and November (future) departures on the four routes that began tri-weekly operation this week shows little or no coach and sleeping car availability on many dates." Amtrak attributes this to "re-accommodation of existing reservations and determining future consist planning for the upcoming holiday periods as well as early 2021." We'll see what they do; are you betting they will do anything? I'm not.

## Is Tri-weekly adding to the cost in any way?

Oh, yes. RailPAC's Paul Dyson reported in late October that according to a crew member from the *Southwest Chief*, "they now spend 3 days and nights fully paid in a hotel in Chicago before their return trip" instead of one night, and "most roomettes are now blocked for crew accommodation and are not available for sale" (the consist of the train is now 2 Sleeping Cars, Dining Car, Lounge Car, and 3 Coaches) The number of high revenue rooms are not equal to what they were before, when a Transition-Sleeper (crew car) was on

the train. There no longer is a baggage car either, with one of the Coach cars being a Coach-Baggage, thereby reducing its capacity of "social distanced" seats available for sale, too. The crewmember also told Dyson, "Most rooms are sold out on eastbound trips." RailPAC member Ralph James writes from his Sierra Nevada home looking over the tracks, "With the tri-weekly schedule of the California Zephyr and only six instead of fourteen passings per week I have not seen very many consists lately, but the two I have noted (including 6 today) have had two power units, two sleepers, diner, lounge and two coaches. No bag or transition." Observers have noted that the Texas Eagle is down to four cars, a Sleeper, Diner-Lounge, and two coaches, with the Sleeper and one Coach continuing to Los Angeles on the Sunset Limited west of San Antonio. (One thing has continued unchanged: the one to four hour delays to Trains 1 and 2 between San Antonio and El Paso due to "freight interference" by the Union Pacific.) Does the long distance system stand a chance to meet Amtrak's inflexible criteria for restoration any time soon? I don't think so.

Let's look at another effect of Tri-weekly, not so much on the long distance passengers, but on the shorter distance riders who use the long distance trains. Christina Kartchner, the actress who is featured in the hit Netflix series "Never Have I Ever," found a few years ago that it was easier to take the Sunset Limited from Los Angeles to Tucson to visit her family over the weekend than to do all the hassle at LA International Airport. She could arrive at LA Union Station Friday night from her home nearby, take a Coach seat overnight, and arrive the next morning at the Tucson train station; then board the westbound train on Sunday night to arrive at LAUS early (very early) on Monday morning. Because the schedule of the Tri-weekly Sunset Limited has not changed that is still possible for her. But, let's look at another location. A

student at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff could have boarded the *Southwest Chief* on Friday night, and arrived at LAUS (or other California stations) Saturday morning to visit relatives until boarding the train Sunday night and arrive back in Flagstaff the next morning. Not so anymore! The westbound Train 3 now departs Flagstaff on Tuesday, Friday, and Sunday which meets the need of this traveler, but the return trip on Train 4 from LAUS is on Tuesday, Thursday or Saturday nights. That knocks out the visiting opportunity with Tri-weekly "service." It's obviously not the only travel problem encountered by people who want to travel by train. Is that important for Amtrak's future? You bet it is.

### Now something personal.

In July we were speculating about taking our semi-annual Amtrak trip from Ft. Worth to Los Angeles in October. We didn't know whether the Covid 19 situation would have abated enough by then or that the places we wanted to visit would be open again. But, we made reservations, with an agent by phone, on Trains 421 and 422 for mid-October, and of course had to pay in advance with a credit card. In late September it was obvious travel would be ok, as Amtrak has done a great job of keeping the trains safe (have you heard of any cases from people traveling the long distance trains? No, they are a safe way to travel and folks are flocking to ride them), but the places we wanted to visit all remained closed! So we made the decision to postpone the trip to next year, if conditions are better then. When I called Amtrak to cancel the reservation, I called the "Julie" line for a simple cancel of the reservation number. It was accepted by the automated voice, and told my fare would be refunded on my credit card, then added there would be a "\$250 cancellation fee." WHAT? I quickly called a live agent, and told her that I thought those fees had been eliminated, which she confirmed and issued a new refund order for the fee. How many folks in the same situation just accepted that the fee was there when it isn't? I hope the agent passed along what happened to me so a correction could be made. Do you think she did? I hope so.

I always call a "live" agent to do Amtrak business, but this time I didn't on the call above. It may be the "old fashioned way" to do business these days, but let's face it I'm old and like to deal with a person, not the internet or an automated "voice." When I told some friends what happened, Gene Poon replied, "Don't be surprised, then, when Amtrak follows the airline model and tacks on a service charge for agent bookings!!!" You think that day is coming? I do. (Sigh)

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## All Aboard Arizona

Todd Liebman, President



For well over a hundred and thirty years, passenger trains have been a daily fixture of life in Northern Arizona, literally building communities like Flagstaff and Winslow, bringing economic activity

to the cities served along Route 66. That came to an end in October when Amtrak reduced the *Southwest Chief* route to three day per week service, along with all long-distance train service in the United States. This cutback is expected to create economic losses of \$239 million in the first nine months to the communities served from Chicago to Los Angeles. These cuts will not help Amtrak's bottom line and may do permanent damage to ridership and the financial health of passenger rail in America, and to the communities served by rail.

Concerns over the reductions include the difficulty in restoring service after furloughing skilled workers, and whether equipment will be properly maintained to return to service, or worse, disposed of. We hope reversing these cuts will be a senate priority and an early priority of the incoming Biden Administration.

Pre-pandemic, our organization was focused on bringing daily, passenger rail service to Amtrak's Sunset Limited Route which serves Southern Arizona cities, and advancing the Sun Corridor, a daily, multi-frequency corridor between Phoenix and Tucson. We have also worked closely with communities along the *Southwest Chief* route, advocating for improved rail service.

While the pandemic impacted ridership throughout the Amtrak system. Interestingly, ridership on Amtrak's long- distance routes, like the *Southwest Chief* through Northern Arizona and the Sunset Limited/Texas Eagle through Southern Arizona saw their ridership hold up far better than the rest of the Amtrak system. We never thought that Amtrak would reduce frequencies since the two tri-weekly trains Amtrak has operated pre-pandemic are among their worst financial performers, and when Amtrak tried these cuts before on a few routes in the early '90s, they not only failed to save money, they created greater losses.

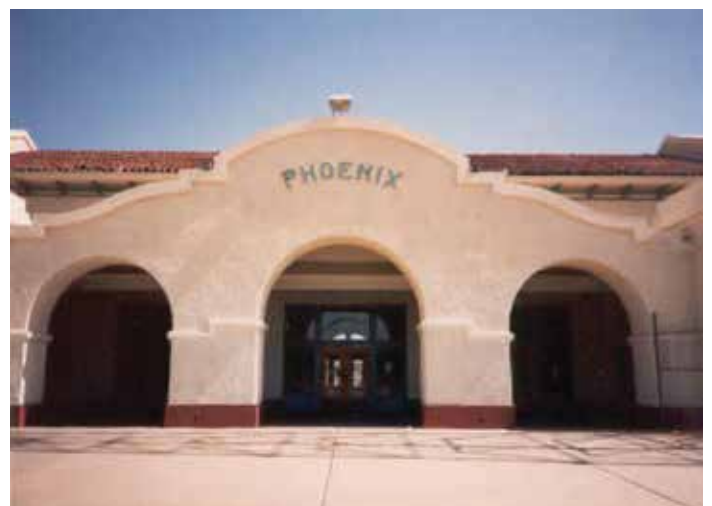
In highlighting the \$239 million negative economic impact of the *Southwest Chief* cuts, Rail Passenger Association President, Jim Matthews, testified before Congress regarding the detrimental impact of these cuts which he described as a "\$2 billion bomb dropped on flyover country." The House reacted and passed legislation to provide funds to prevent the cuts. Unfortunately, the legislation is stalled in the Senate as we wait for compromise on pandemic relief.

We know that the lack of passenger rail options in Arizona is an economic development killer. Conversely, a high- performance

rail corridor between Los Angeles-Phoenix-Tucson and even further east to El Paso would be an economic driver for Arizona. Arizona's congested transportation system diminishes the quality of life for Arizonans increasing air pollution, congestion related delays, and negatively impacting the state's economy. Conversely, for a relatively small investment, Amtrak could return to Phoenix, the Sunset Limited/Texas Eagle could operate daily, and the *Southwest Chief* could return to daily service across Northern Arizona. It is often in rural communities, like Yuma and Winslow, where passenger rail has the biggest impact. These communities have fewer public transportation options, and the train serves as a vital lifeline for residents and visitors alike.

The outlook does not have to be bleak. We can achieve our goals related to daily Amtrak service on routes across Arizona both north and south. We can establish fast, frequent rail service between Phoenix and Tucson on the Sun Corridor. We can take Phoenix, the largest American city without intercity rail passenger service, and link it with California and points east all the way to Texas, Chicago and New Orleans. Amtrak has submitted a plan to Congress that gets America on the way toward these goals.

There are hopeful signs. The movement to make the Sunset daily is gaining momentum. We continue to meet with local governments to get resolutions of support. Amtrak has identified the Los Angeles-Phoenix-Tucson as a corridor to be implemented by 2035. The time to invest in passenger rail is now in order to take advantage of infrastructure funds. Our organization can be a resource to policy makers as they make decisions in favor of passenger rail. We can also create synergistic relationships with other advocates. We continue these efforts and welcome ideas and help. See you on the rails.



Still no passenger trains at Phoenix Union Station -  
Russ Jackson

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# Amtrak FY'20 Results Released

By Andrew Selden, President, United Rail Passenger Alliance



Empire Builder at Browning MT in 2015 - Tim Stevens

Amtrak released its preliminary annual results for fiscal year 2020 (the 12 months ending September 30) at the end of October, in the form of the September Monthly Report, which rolls up the full year results. The official final results won't be available until the formal Annual Report is released in several months, but any changes in the numbers then will be very minor.

## **We can sum up the results in a sentence: The Covid epidemic sank Amtrak like a torpedoed Liberty ship.**

The social impact of the epidemic manifested itself in March, six months into the fiscal year, when intercity travel abruptly dropped to near zero, followed closely by a large part of urban commuter traffic. Amtrak was hit just as hard as were the airlines and transit services.

The numbers in the September report paint the ugly picture. *Ridership*—Amtrak's favorite metric because it vastly overstates the comparative importance of the NEC—fell 47.4% to 16.8 million. *Revenue Passenger Miles*—the only metric that really matters to a company chartered to carry people between cities, because only that accounts for the distances customers are transported—fell 46.8% to 3.45 billion.

Amtrak responded to the sudden collapse in traffic, concentrated in its short corridors, by cutting frequencies in its higher-density corridors thereby reducing the inventory it manufactured for sale, its *available seat miles*, down for the year 23.1% to 9.78 billion. The reduction was not enough, however. The ratio between available seat miles produced and revenue passenger miles sold showed up in reduced load factors, averaging in the 30% range for the full year (and, of course, *far less* in the third and fourth quarters). Some car lines were eliminated on inter-regional trains, but their output, ridership and load factors rebounded quickly through the summer.

But the declines were not uniform across the system. We have noted previously that the impact was much worse in the NEC, and, to a lesser extent, the regional corridors, than it was in the

inter-regional segment served by the long distance trains. By the end of the year on 9/30, this was reflected in the segment totals. NEC total ridership was about 6.1 million, of which only about 2 million was actual intercity traffic (the remainder is statistically classified as commuter traffic). Regional corridors strongly out-performed the NEC, at 8 million, and inter-regional trains carried about 2.7 million customers. But because they carried them on average over far longer distances, the inter-regional trains, as always, produced far more transportation output than either the NEC or the regional corridors, once again becoming Amtrak's largest business with 1.41 billion RPMs. The regional corridors produced 1.03 billion, and the NEC was smallest with just 1.0 billion (total; the NEC's *intercity* passenger miles came to no more than 0.3 billion, by far Amtrak's *smallest* business segment).

These outcomes were clearly reflected in Amtrak's financial results. Total ticket revenues dropped 47.4%, and total revenues fell 31.9% to \$2.27 billion. Total expenses, meanwhile came down just 8.5% to \$3.07 billion. After accounting for non-cash items and other adjustments, the net loss on the year was a cool \$1.7 billion, up 91.9% from FY 2019. This all occurred before management exacerbated its financial crisis by cutting back the only part of its business that was holding up, and even recovering to near-normal traffic levels, the inter-regional long distance trains. Between April and July, the inter-regional trains produced more passenger miles of output and more revenue than all the other trains combined (including the NEC). Amtrak couldn't let that go on indefinitely, so they fixed the embarrassment by slashing the interregional trains to three days a week on most routes in October, the first month of FY'21.

## **A few particular items jump out of the September report.**

Deferred maintenance, mostly in the NEC, is an annual shell game played by management. Every year, several hundred million dollars in mostly fixed facility costs that exceed the sum of revenues-plus-subsidies gets deferred. Even Amtrak can't spend cash it doesn't have, even on necessary upkeep to NEC track, bridges, tunnels, power systems and stations. This year, that deferral came to \$494.2 million. (The so-called "state of good repair deficit" in the NEC thus also went up again, by that amount.) This is also a rough measure of just how unprofitable Amtrak's NEC business really is.

The somewhat glib explanatory note in the Monthly Report states, "The underspend vs. plan [i.e., the capital spending authorized and budgeted but in the event not spent] is primarily driven by stations and infrastructure delays and fleet projects." Translation into plain English: We deferred maintenance on our track and stations, and we backpedaled on Superliner, Horizon, Amfleet and P42 locomotive replacement (but not Acela II acquisition, which charges ahead; management spent \$425 million on the new Acela II high speed trains and related facilities in a year when demand for NEC high speed services dropped to near zero and remained down about 95% at year end).



Management's failure to respond in a timely and aggressive manner to the sudden loss of revenue is reflected in the amounts that it *did* spend in a disaster year on what it likes to call "capital" items, much of which is in fixed facilities upkeep, mostly in the NEC. In FY'20, the company spent \$1.393 billion on "capital" items, *up* \$24.6 million from last year. Amtrak can spend \$1.4 billion on "capital" items in a year that it lost \$1.7 billion only thanks to taxpayer generosity. The projects included in this spending included track and other NEC infrastructure (\$632.7 million, down just 2.1%); stations and real estate (\$127.4M, down 7%); fleet upkeep and replacement (\$285.8M, down 13.4%); technology (computers, PTC, etc., \$101.1M, down 8.6%); ADA compliance (\$109.9M, *up* 40.6%); and a mystery category called "support" (\$11.9M, down 7.6%).

It is not a coincidence that Amtrak's enlarged capital spending closely approximates its annual loss. Revenues do not cover fixed facility costs (and don't even cover costs of train operations "above the rail"). That's where the subsidies go, the great majority into the bottomless pit of the NEC infrastructure. It's also why Amtrak has taken to using an artificial and deceptive metric it calls "adjusted operating results"—which is fancy language designed to exclude the NEC's huge annual facility upkeep costs from the calculation of financial results, to hide the real costs and losses of NEC train operations.

Amtrak's principal business activity and its core competency is not the operation of intercity passenger trains. It is the extraction of subsidies from gullible (or complicit) government subsidy providers. The financial wreckage of FY'20 offered Amtrak an opportunity, which it promptly seized, to beg congress not for the two or three billion it would need to cover


the revenue shortfall from the epidemic, but for an *additional* \$2 billion for train operations and capital spending through the recovery, plus a stretch request for \$5 billion *more* for a list of dream spending projects. All this, from a country that is already more than \$30 trillion in debt. Amtrak's thinking must be, "If you're already down 30,000 billion, what's 5 more?"

We'll close with the following footnotes from the Monthly Report, which appear to reflect an attempt both to conceal and to rationalize the degree to which management's quirky route accounting practices deviate from the generally accepted accounting principles (GAAP) used by all publicly-traded American businesses. If you can't make any sense out of these, Amtrak has succeeded; if you can, you are ahead of every member of congress and 99.999% of Americans:

"Note: Amtrak reports Adjusted Operating Earnings as the key financial measure to evaluate results, Net Income/(Loss) will continue to be reported for reference. Adjusted Operating earnings represents Amtrak's cash funding needs and is a reasonable proxy for Federal Operating Support needed in line with the appropriation. Route level results (reported on page 8) reflect the change to Adjusted Operating Earnings, in line with consolidated financials.

"Note: Adjusted Operating Earnings is defined as GAAP Net Loss excluding: (1) certain non-cash items (depreciation, income tax expense, non-cash portion of pension and other post retirement employment benefits, and state capital payment amortization); and (2) GAAP income statement items reported with capital or debt results or other grants (project related revenue/costs reported with capital results, expense related to Inspector General's office, and interest expense, net)"

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# Riverside County Passenger Rail Projects

Brian Yanity – RailPAC Board Member. All Photos by the author.

## Overview of Passenger Rail in Riverside County

Riverside County, with nearly 2.3 million people, is the fourth most populous county in California. Combined with its slightly less populous neighbor to the north, San Bernardino County, it forms the Inland Empire of Southern California. Riverside County is a strategically important location for rail transportation in California. Both Union Pacific and BNSF Railway's main lines east from Southern California to the rest of nation pass through the county.

The Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC) is a member of the five-county Southern California Regional Rail Authority (SCRRA) that operates Metrolink. Three Metrolink lines currently serve Riverside County providing connections to Los Angeles, Orange and San Bernardino Counties. In addition, Amtrak's long-distance *Southwest Chief* makes a stop at Riverside-Downtown station (10,974 riders in 2019), while the *Sunset Limited* stops in Palm Springs (3,045 riders in 2019)



Source: Caltrans, SunLine Transit Agency, Riverside County

Figure ES.4: Existing and Proposed Rail Services from Riverside County Strategic Assessment – Executive Summary by HDR, January 2016

RCTC owns and operates all nine of the Metrolink stations in Riverside County. Metrolink's Inland Empire-Orange County Line serves West Corona, Corona – North Main, La Sierra and Riverside Downtown (both in City of Riverside). The 91/Perris Valley Line serves these stations as well as Riverside Hunter Park, Moreno Valley/March Field, Perris-Downtown and Perris-South. The Riverside Line serves Jurupa Valley/Pedley and Riverside.

Project	Funding (million \$)
Avenue 66 Grade Separation	61.7
Jurupa Road Grade Separation	108.4
McKinley Street Grade Separation	98.0
Riverside Downtown Station Improvements	50.0
Riverside Downtown Train Layover Facility	5.0
Moreno Valley – March Field Station Upgrade	16.0
Perris Valley Line Track Rehabilitation, Modernization	3.5
South Perris Light Maintenance Facility	210.0
Perris Valley Line, 2nd main track – 4th Layover Track Perris South	30.0
	<b>582.6</b>

The Riverside Line serves Jurupa Valley/Pedley and Riverside.

As shown in the table on left, over half a billion dollars' worth of rail capital projects are in the works within Riverside County.

*Riverside County passenger rail capital projects planned & under construction*

Source: RCTC website

## Grade Separations

The Avenue 66 grade separation project in Mecca, under construction along the Sunset Route in the eastern Coachella Valley, is scheduled to be complete by the end of 2021. Two important Riverside County grade separation projects are planned to be built in the next few years: Jurupa Road in the city of Jurupa Valley [on UP LA Sub/Metrolink Riverside Line], and McKinley Street in the city of Corona [on the BNSF mainline]. Many more grade separation projects in the county are being planned.

Existing McKinley street grade crossing of BNSF mainline in Corona



## Riverside-Downtown Station Improvements

At the Riverside-Downtown station, RCTC and Metrolink are planning to build an additional passenger loading platform and tracks to improve Metrolink service. Also planned is an extension of the existing pedestrian bridge with additional elevator and stair access, along with added sidewalks and parking. The approximately \$50 million project is in pre-construction.

This \$5 million expansion of the Metrolink train layover facility at the Riverside-Downtown Station is under construction, and is expected to be completed in 2021. This project will enable more efficient service by allowing more trains to be housed at the station overnight at the end of each night's shift.



Riverside-Downtown station



*Riverside-Downtown Station Layover Facility, under construction in mid-September 2020*

## Inland Empire-Orange County Line

The Inland Empire-Orange County Line between Oceanside and San Bernardino stops in Riverside-Downtown, Riverside-La Sierra, Corona-North Main and Corona-West. In FY2019, the line had 16 daily trains and an average daily weekday ridership of about 4,500 riders, with average of 1,166 weekday boardings within Riverside County. Due to pandemic related service adjustments effective November 2020, the Inland Empire- Orange County Line has seven LA-Riverside trains both ways each weekday, and two each way on the weekends.

## Riverside Line

Metrolink's Riverside Line between LA Union Station and Riverside-Downtown has stops in Montebello/Commerce, Industry, Pomona, Ontario-East, Jurupa Valley/Pedley. In FY2019, the line had 12 daily trains with an average daily weekday ridership of about 4,300 riders, with average of 583 weekday boardings within Riverside County. Due to pandemic related service adjustments effective November 2020, the Riverside Line runs four LA-Riverside trains both ways each weekday, and none on the weekends.

## Perris Valley Line

The Perris Valley Line (PVL) is a remnant of the California Southern Railroad, a Santa Fe subsidiary completed in 1882 between Barstow and San Diego. The town of Perris was established in 1885, and named in honor of Fred T. Perris, chief engineer of the California Southern. The Santa Fe Railway's San Jacinto Branch Line extended to San Jacinto from Perris in 1889.

Reconstruction and rehabilitation of the 24 miles of track from Riverside to South Perris began in 2013, funded with \$248 million from the state of California and a \$75 million Federal Transit Administration Small Starts grant. Passenger service to Los Angeles began in 2016 as an extension of Metrolink's 91 Line through Fullerton, with four stations in north Riverside, Moreno Valley, Perris-Downtown and Perris-South.

In FY2019, the combined 91/PVL had 11 daily trains with an average daily weekday ridership of a little less than 3,000

riders, with average of 1,718 weekday boardings within Riverside County. Due to pandemic related service adjustments effective November 2020, the 91/PVL has four LA-Perris trains both ways each weekday, and two daily trains both ways on Saturdays and Sundays.

## Moreno Valley/March Field Station Improvements

The Moreno Valley/March Field station serves Metrolink's 91/Perris Valley Line and is the midpoint between the Perris-Downtown and the Riverside-Downtown stations. RCTC and Metrolink plan to build a second train platform and lengthen the existing train platform to accommodate the length of Metrolink's standard eight-car trains. Environmental reviews are under way. Pending environmental approvals and funding, construction could begin in 2021 and be complete in early 2022. Funding for the \$16 million project is mostly provided by a Federal Transportation Administration grant.



*Moreno Valley/March Field station, on the Perris Valley Line*

## Perris Valley Line Track Rehabilitation, Modernization

Perris Valley Line will be upgraded by 2023 with 2.7 miles of second track that are part of a future nine-mile double-track corridor south of the Moreno Valley/March Field station. This new section of second track has an estimated cost of \$41.5 million is currently not funded. There are long term plans for a new passenger rail station along this section, roughly where the PVL crosses Ramona Expressway north of Perris.



*South Perris layover facility and station, at end of the Perris Valley Line*

## Next Gen Rail Corridors Analysis Study

RCTC is evaluating future commuter rail expansions as part of a Next Gen Rail Study.

### PVL Extension to Hemet and San Jacinto

Extending Metrolink service on the PVL to Hemet and San Jacinto and the existing RCTC-owned rail corridor has long been discussed. The line is currently out of service beyond the reboard just past the I-215. Many years ago it was used by BSNF freight trains to deliver potatoes as far as San Jacinto. The 2016 SCAG RTP/2019 RCTC Next Generation Rail Corridors Analysis estimated a cost of \$400 million to extend the PVL from Perris to San Jacinto, with an expected completion date of 2035.

### PVL Extension to Temecula

South of Perris, the fast-growing cities of Menifee (pop. 95,000), Murrieta (pop. 116,000) and Temecula (pop. 115,000) lie along a historic rail corridor. The AT&SF abandoned the line through Temecula Canyon to San Diego in 1900 due to washouts, and service to Temecula ended in 1935.

A 2005 study commissioned by RCTC determined that a new passenger rail line to Temecula via a brand-new trackage from Perris would be feasible. The 2016 SCAG RTP/2019 Next Generation Rail Corridors Analysis estimated a cost of \$500 million to extend the PVL to Temecula, with no expected completion date given.

### Corona to Lake Elsinore

Rail service has also been studied along the I-15 corridor from Corona to Wildomar (pop. 37,000), Lake Elsinore (pop. 68,000) and on to Murrieta and Temecula. The 2019 Next Generation Rail Corridors Analysis estimated a cost of \$600 million for a new Corona to Lake Elsinore rail line with no expected completion date given.

### Fullerton-Riverside-San Bernardino third main track

A third mainline track between Fullerton, Riverside and San Bernardino has been proposed but is not yet funded. Part of the LOSSAN/ Metrolink SCORE program in collaboration with BNSF, the project will increase capacity, improve reliability, and reduce passenger-freight train congestion conflicts on one of the nation's busiest freight rail corridors shared with passenger trains. On the 46 miles between San Bernardino and Fullerton, BNSF has currently two main tracks and about 15 miles of third mainline track. Passenger trains operating on this segment include Amtrak (*Southwest Chief*) and Metrolink (91/Perris Valley Line and Inland Empire Orange County Line). Full completion of the remaining 31 miles of third main track from Fullerton to San Bernardino, with key fourth track segments at Corona and La Sierra, is being studied. A portion of third mainline track between Atwood and Esperanzain Orange County is moving forward due to a federal grant received by Metrolink.

### Coachella Valley Rail Service

There are limited public transit options between the Coachella Valley and Los Angeles. Currently the only passenger rail service to the Coachella Valley is Amtrak's *Sunset Limited* from

Los Angeles to New Orleans, which stops in Palm Springs three days a week:

- Going west from LA, its scheduled stop at Palm Springs is 12:36 AM, Monday, Thursday and Saturday.
- Going east to LA, its scheduled stop in Palm Springs at 2:02 AM, Wednesday, Friday and Monday.

The unstaffed Palm Springs station is located in a rather isolated location with no local transit access, four miles away from the central part of the city. Obviously, middle-of-the-night service just three times a week draws very few passengers between LA and Palm Springs. Even a train that only ran once a day each way during daytime hours could have substantial ridership, given the daily auto traffic between the LA Basin and the Coachella Valley. However, with fast and reliable rail service the demand could easily be an order of magnitude larger than that. Both the Coachella Valley and the San Gorgonio Pass area have experienced great population growth in recent years, and together are home to over half a million people. The greater Palm Springs area typically attracts well over 10 million visitors each year. Pre-pandemic, the Morongo Casino attracted an estimated 1.5 million unique visitors per year, or several thousand per day.

In the 2020 regional transportation plan of the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), Los Angeles to Coachella Valley via the Inland Empire was identified as the region's second most significant gap in passenger rail service behind the Antelope Valley to Bakersfield gap. The plan stated that 130,000 daily trips pass through the San Gorgonio Pass each weekday along I-10, and this is forecasted to grow by 47 percent by 2035.

Additional intercity rail service between LA and the Coachella Valley has long been a goal in Riverside County. Since the early 1990s, the concept has been studied at least seven times by public agencies. RCTC is studying options for the Coachella Valley-San Gorgonio Pass (CVRSGP) Corridor Service Project, in coordination with the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). Union Pacific's Sunset Route (which is paralleled by Interstate 10) from Los Angeles to El Paso is one of the most important freight rail routes in the Western U.S.- linking California with Texas, the Midwest and Southeast. Each day, dozens of UP freight trains per day pass through the Coachella Valley on UP's Yuma Subdivision, a segment of the Sunset Route.

While UP has invested in many track capacity improvements on the Sunset Route over the years, one of its chokepoints remains the San Gorgonio Pass/Coachella Valley. UP's Yuma Subdivision mainline is entirely double-tracked in Riverside County, except for several miles between Thermal and Mecca (east of where the CVRSGP would terminate in Indio). The 2018 California State Rail Plan identified the UP Sunset Route (Yuma Subdivision) as one of the eight 'principal current and potential bottlenecks' on shared passenger and freight corridors in the state.

Capital improvements needed include new and improved mainline track passing tracks, sidings and several entirely

new passenger rail stations. After a 2010 study, Union Pacific identified nearly one billion dollars in capital infrastructure funding the railroad deemed necessary to upgrade passenger service through the corridor.

Fast, reliable service is essential to attract a rail ridership significant enough to provide major public benefits of reduced traffic congestion and pollution on the I-10 corridor. Passenger rail advocates have called for a higher frequency than the two



October 2020



or three daily round trips proposed by the 2016 plan, along with high speeds. As stated by Paul Dyson in Q3 2017 Steel Wheels, "The County's draft plan to add just two or three round trips a day is a waste of money and will not be successful. Trains with an average speed of 40 mph are simply not competitive given the additional first and last mile legs of any rail

Potential station stops for the rail service are still not defined and will be determined later. Proposed intermediate stops between Indio and Los Angeles Union Station include Rancho Mirage ("Mid-Valley"), Palm Springs, Cabazon ("Pass Area" serving Morongo Casino and Banning), Redlands/Loma Linda, and the existing Riverside Downtown and Fullerton stations.

In 2016, an Alternative Analysis identified a preferred 145-mile route from LA Union Station via Fullerton, Riverside and the San Geronio Pass to end in Indio or Coachella. Since then, RCTC has been conducting environmental studies with public scoping. The environmental analysis currently being conducted for this stage of the project is a Tier 1/Program EIS/EIR that meet federal and state requirements. RCTC and its project partners anticipate to release the Draft EIR/EIS for the Tier 1 analysis in summer 2021 with a possible Record of Decision in 2022. During this process, RCTC will be actively looking at potential funding sources for a Tier 2 analysis, which involve more detailed engineering, design and environmental studies. The Tier 1 phase of work is being funded through a \$2.9 million grant awarded by the FRA to Caltrans and RCTC in April 2015 and matched by RCTC with \$1.1 million of local funds. After completing the Draft EIS/EIR, a Service Development Plan will be prepared to conceptualize how the new intercity passenger service would operate and what infrastructure improvements would be required to accommodate it.

The new LA-Coachella Valley passenger service could potentially be operated by Amtrak, similar to other state intercity rail corridors within California. RCTC's draft plan has an initial proposed frequency of two or three daily round trips using conventional diesel locomotive technology similar to that used by Amtrak and Metrolink. Travel times would be about 3 hours, 15 minutes in each direction, or an overall average speed of 39 mph due to the need to interface with freight traffic and climb over the San Geronio pass. This is 30 to 60 minutes slower than driving, depending on the day of the week and the time of day.

journey. ...We must aim higher". Michael Setty, writing in the May-September 2017 issue of California Rail News, "Coachella Valley trains could be winners- with better plan", proposed a service of 8 to 10 daily LA-Palmdale round trips using Diesel Multiple Unit (DMU) trains smaller, lighter and faster than the Surfliner-style diesel locomotive-pulled trains that the 2016 RCTC study proposed. However, these DMU trains currently require a waiver to address crashworthiness issues when mixed with freight train operations.

Upgrading the UP Sunset Route between Riverside and the Coachella Valley is also important for increasing the frequency of the *Sunset Limited* from three days a week to daily. CVR service would also potentially connect with future high speed rail to the Inland Empire, and be a part of a future Southwest High Speed Rail network to Arizona. A 2014 FRA-led planning effort, the Southwest Multi-State Rail Planning Study, recommended a "blue-ribbon commission" to study a high-speed rail link between Southern California and Phoenix. Such a service could be integrated with future Phoenix-Tucson passenger rail service.

### Coachella Valley Special Festival Trains

Special trains to Coachella and Stagecoach music festivals in Indio are under development by RCTC and its partners. More than 125,000 people descend on the Coachella Valley each of the three weekends in April that the annual events take place, causing massive traffic jams Thursday through Monday.

RCTC and the Los Angeles-San Diego-San Luis Obispo Rail Corridor Agency (LOSSAN) have requested access to run special Amtrak trains to the music festivals. The 10-car train would operate on Pacific Surfliner equipment, with each trip accommodating up to 750 passengers. The Coachella Valley Special Event Train is planned to have two daily round-trips between Los Angeles Union Station and a newly constructed platform in Indio, with a connecting shuttle to the festival grounds at the Empire Polo Club. A similar train has operated in 2008, when festival promoter Goldenvoice cut a one-year deal

with Amtrak for the Coachella Express between LA and Indio. The train featured a makeshift dance floor and passengers were treated to live DJ sets.

In 2019, the California State Transportation Agency awarded \$5.9 million State Rail Assistance program grant to RCTC for constructing a 900-foot train station platform and pedestrian facilities in Indio. RCTC contributed an additional \$2.7 million to build the \$8.6 million project, which includes the station improvements along with operating expenses for the special event train between 2021 and 2025. While originally planned to start in April 2020, delays (including protracted negotiations with the host railroad Union Pacific) prevented it from taking off in time, even before the festivals were cancelled due to COVID-19. Based on the current circumstances and discussions with the host railroads, this project is currently on hold until a future date.

### **New Indio Station**

In February 2020, the Indio City Council approved a feasibility study of multimodal transportation center built around a future train station. The new full-service Indio passenger rail station, will build up around the initial platform development for special music festival service. It is centrally located in downtown Indio, where Indio Boulevard intersects Jackson Street. The new Indio train station is a centerpiece of the city's plans to revitalize the downtown area. The site is the same location historic station opened by the Southern Pacific in 1876. It was a stop on the *Sunset Limited* until being discontinued in 1998 by Amtrak. It is presently a Greyhound bus station adjacent to sidings along Union Pacific's Sunset Route mainline currently used for storing freight cars.

### **Riverside County and Future High Speed Rail, Electrification**

Electrification of the LA-Anaheim corridor for the Phase 1 of California High Speed Rail could lead to regional Metrolink link trains being electrified. This could take different forms, either completely conventional overhead wire catenary electrification or possible hybrid locomotives under development such as diesel-battery hybrid or catenary-battery hybrid technologies.

The LA-Fullerton segment of the LA-Anaheim Phase 1 HSR project is on BNSF-owned mainline right-of-way, part of the San Bernardino Subdivision from LA to Riverside and San Bernardino. Electrification of the Fullerton-Riverside segment should be studied. LA-Fullerton-Riverside 'higher speed' electrified Metrolink service, at speeds up to 125 mph, would be a game changer for this densely-populated corridor. More frequent and faster zero-emissions electric trains could take tens of thousands of cars off the freeways each day.

The 2018 State Rail Plan called for planning for "development of future electrified regional services and phased implementation HSR services in the Inland Empire". Phase 2 of the High Speed Rail plans to pass through Riverside County on the way to San Diego.

## **Riverside County's Traffic Relief Plan**

The RCTC board unanimously adopted a Traffic Relief Plan in May 2020, while deciding to postpone prior plans to place a sales tax measure on the 2020 ballot, to fund the projects listed in the plan. A half-cent sales tax was originally proposed for the November 2020 election. In the meantime, the Traffic Relief Plan will serve as a reference document for future decision-making, and as an expenditure plan for a possible voter approved county sales tax measure in the future.

While the vast majority of the proposed Traffic Relief Plan's revenue is budgeted for streets, highways and freeways, the plan would commit 20% of new sales tax dollars for rail. This portion is proposed to include:

- Building new tracks within existing rights-of-way
- Station improvements
- Extending Metrolink service on the Perris Valley Line to Hemet and San Jacinto
- Building new stations in the San Geronio Pass and Coachella Valley for future daily passenger service between L.A. and the Coachella Valley
- Funds for operation of rail service in Riverside County (including increased service frequencies).

Notable among the plan's proposed increase to rail service are "reverse commute" trains that bring passengers to Riverside County job centers.

Strategic freight rail investments by the county, in collaboration by the state and federal governments, also have significant public benefits. All of Riverside County's passenger rail service is on tracks shared with freight trains. Additional freight capacity facilitates more passenger rail frequencies, less delays and faster service. In January 2020, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors endorsed both short-haul freight rail and mode-shift of more freight movement from truck to rail as part of its annual Legislative Platform.

The decision to delay the Traffic Relief Plan ballot measure could offer an opportunity to advance more rail projects, and increase future funding for both Riverside County passenger and freight rail.

### **For more information:**

- RCTC Station Improvements: <https://www.rctc.org/projects/stationimprovements/>
- Coachella Valley- San Geronio Pass Rail Corridor Service Project: <http://www.rctc.org/projects/coachella-valley-san-geronio-pass-corridor-rail-corridor-service-project/>
- Riverside County Traffic Relief Plan: <https://trafficreliefplan.org/>

# High-Speed Rail Update

by Steve Roberts, RailPAC President

The activities of Brightline\*, both in Florida and the West, dominated HSR activity over the past three months. While the quarter included major initiatives moved forward, Las Vegas service did meet a roadblock near the end of the quarter.

(\*The proposed High Speed Rail Link between Las Vegas and the Los Angeles area is now known as "Brightline West" after the company parted with the Virgin Group in early August. ED.)

## First a recap of the 3rd Quarter; Brightline achieved the following:

**Brightline West** - During the May, June and July period the environmentally approved Brightline route received bonding authority for private activity bonding from California, Nevada and US Department of Transportation sufficient to leverage the full funding of the first segment of the project (Las Vegas – Victorville, CA). Brightline and Caltrans reached agreement for the railroad to lease segments of the Caltrans owned I-15 right-of-way from the Nevada border to Victorville. Brightline also came to an agreement with the San Bernardino Transportation Authority to explore the routing of a high-speed rail extension parallel to I-15 from Victorville to Rancho Cucamonga (connection to Metrolink). Land has been purchased for a terminal and Transit Oriented Development in Las Vegas and for a station and maintenance base in Victorville.

**Brightline Florida** – Construction continued on full double tracking of the current rail line and new construction to Orlando International Airport. Tracks were laid in the airport terminal. Agreement was reached with Disney for a stop on the Tampa extension to serve their resort area. This will be an early priority when construction begins on the Tampa extension. Negotiations were underway with Florida DOT for use of the I-4 right-of-way for the Tampa extension.

## Fourth Quarter

Brightline West – Funded by LA Metro, Transit Intercity Rail Capital Program and Brightline a more detailed preliminary engineering rail line location study (within the right-of way) will be conducted for the Victorville – Palmdale Hi-Desert Corridor route segment. The Metrolink Board approved a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for a connection with Brightline at Palmdale and Rancho Cucamonga. The California Infrastructure and Economic Development Bank approved reimbursement of current spending on the project from future private activity bond sales. Brightline applied to the Surface Transportation Board for modification of its previously approved EIS to allow for it to shift the rail line from north and west of I-15 to the median of I-15. This reflects the agreement with Caltrans. This application would also allow stretches of single-track to reflect start-up train frequencies.

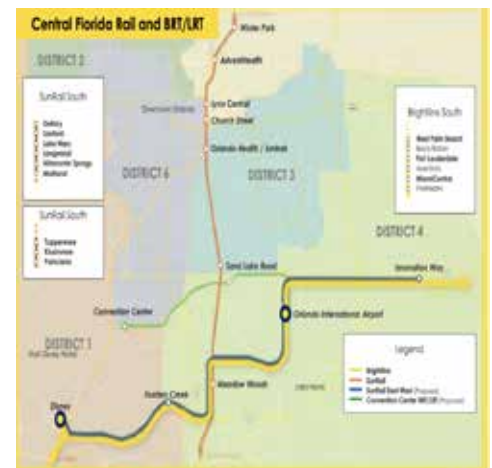
## Florida

During the 4th quarter period construction continued on the double tracking of the existing rail line and extension to Orlando International Airport. At this point construction is about 45% complete. Allowing the expansion of Brightline's product mix, the Miami-Dade Commissioners approved the framework for

Brightline to operate commuter rail service between stations on the southern end of its route. New stations have been added to increase the footprint of the service. The proposed stations are an "on-dock" Port of Miami station to serve cruise passengers, Adventure (between Fort Lauderdale and Miami), Boca Raton and a northern station along the Treasure Coast (i.e. Cocoa) before the route turns west to Orlando. Work on the Tampa extension continues with an MOU with a developer that allows Brightline to conduct an environmental analysis for a Tampa area station in the Ybor City area (on the eastern edge of Tampa). In the Orlando area discussions are underway between Brightline and SunRail (Orlando's commuter rail line) for joint track usage. Brightline would use SunRail tracks through the Meadow Woods area as part of its Tampa extension while SunRail would use Brightline tracks and SunRail tracks to create an east-west commuter service from east of the Orlando airport, through the airport, to the Disney stop (See map Figure below, the blue line is the new proposed SunRail route, the yellow line is the Brightline route and the red line is the existing SunRail and Amtrak route. Brightline would also connect to a proposed Bus Rapid Transit or Light Rail (Green Line) at the Orlando Airport creating another connecting route for the service.

Finally, as was noted above Brightline Las Vegas service hit a roadblock in November. It had planned to sell private activity bonds to begin construction, but market conditions, the election and pandemic created a high degree of uncertainty - too high for the market at this time. Given that the bonds had to be sold by the end of quarter, postponement was not an option, so the bond sale was cancelled. At this point Brightline has to undertake actions to de-risk the project. The election and a vaccine will help in this effort but additional actions such as increased private equity, pre-engineering studies to calibrate estimated construction costs are examples of such actions. More confidence in the feasibility of the links with Metrolink allowing all-rail travel (i.e. completion of the study of track location within the Hi-Desert corridor) is another example. Both California and Nevada remain favorably disposed to authorizing private activity bonding for the Las Vegas project.

**Orlando Business Journal** - A map of proposed corridors by Brightline which would include a connection to Orlando International Airport. The map details other potential connections, such as the proposed BRT/LRT to the Orange County Convention Center.



# The Diverse Markets of the Long-Distance Trains

by Steve Roberts

While the value and the importance of the long-distance train network is now more clearly understood by members of Congress, larger political issues prevented the passage of supplemental funding and a mandate for daily service. As information, because of the Pandemic, Amtrak's FY21 funding request is in two segments. The first is Amtrak's regular FY21 appropriation while the second is a Supplemental Appropriation to offset the ticket revenue shortfalls to Amtrak and the States due to economic impact of the Coronavirus. Currently a continuing resolution is funding Amtrak. In addition to funding it is critical that Congress also include a mandate be provided to continue daily operation of the Amtrak's long-distance network. As Congress moves forward to finalize the FY21 budget and begins work on the FY22 budget it is critical that supporters of the long-distance network keep reminding their members of the value and importance of the long-distance routes.

In advocating for Amtrak's long-distance routes, I wanted to provide an overview of the benefits of these services. First, these routes are a critical lifeline for essential journeys. These routes are also vital for visits to family and friends maintaining the bonds of relationships. Ridership has been holding up more strongly on the long-distance routes than for the rest of the system, underscoring how vital these trains are for rural America where the options are fewer and less appealing. The key to the value of the long-distance routes is their ability to perform a significant transportation function by serving diverse multifaceted markets. Also important is that these routes provide options and choices for travelers.

## Markets – The Large Matrix of City Pairs

Each of Amtrak's long-distance routes connect a large matrix of hundreds of overlapping city pairs (often more than 500). The ridership profile of long-distance trains finds individual passengers boarding and de-training as individual riders make overlapping short-trips and long-trips. These overlapping travel patterns mean that long-distance train ridership does not fit neatly into the specific point-to-point "hub and spoke" travel everyone is familiar with in the airline industry.

The majority of riders on National Network trains are traveling between small cities and medium-size cities or from small cities to large cities. Each rider has a different trip purpose. Many riders are traveling through major cities as they travel from one small city to another. While riders with an average trip length of 300 to 400 miles dominate coach travel on the long-distance trains, there is also significant travel in the 500 to 1,500 mile segment. Also this average trip length does not mean that the bulk of travel is between a few cities 300 to 400 miles distant, it just means the average trip length between the large matrixes of overlapping city pairs along the route averages 300 - 400 miles.

## Markets – Rural Access to Urban Areas

One key long-distance train benefit is these routes' ability to seamlessly connect small and medium size rural cities with large urban areas, the megaregions, often hundreds of miles distant. This service provides critical mobility between the rural cities with all of the urbanized cities of the megaregion and its connecting transportation options, all at an affordable cost to the rider. Also as a function of their extended routes, the long-distance trains not only link the megaregion they just departed from to rural cities but also link these rural cities to the megaregion 400 miles distant that is the train's destination. Thus the long-distance train extends the service area of both megaregions.

## Markets – Linking the Megaregions Together

The long-distance routes also connect the megaregions together. This is especially important option for older travelers, the disabled and for those with medical conditions that preclude flying or driving. This option is very valuable for older drivers because today's congested interstates, with high volumes of truck traffic, represent a stressful barrier to travel.

## Markets – Cities without Air or Motor Coach Service

The market based restructuring of the air and motor coach networks in the US has meant a the elimination of air service to many cities. Almost 20% of Amtrak riders on the long-distance trains reside in communities without air service. For residents of these cities the long-distance train represents the only public transportation available.

## Markets – Service Shortcomings of Current Air or Motor Coach Networks

The market based restructuring of the air and motor coach networks in the US has also resulted in a substantial reduction in the usefulness of the service for travelers even for those residing in cities with air or motor coach service. For motor coach travelers, a reduction in the number of routes and stops means fewer cities have service. Where service remains travel often means a long, circuitous trip with multiple transfers. For air travelers, not only are there fewer cities with air service, but the industry's focus on maximum revenue means very high fares for shorter distance travel to major regional hub cities 200 to 300 miles distant. For travel to non-hub cities this not only means high fares but lengthy, circuitous travel and a transfer at a hub city for a short 300 mile journey.

## Markets – Corridor Frequencies within Megaregions.

Within the urbanized area of the megaregion the long-distance trains often operates on rail lines utilized for multi-frequency corridor rail service. In this market the long-distance train provides an additional frequency often in shoulder or off-peak





*California Zephyr Westbound passes Hirshdale, Truckee river canyon CA - Chris Mohs*

periods when demand would not warrant the operation of a short-distance corridor train. Local corridor riders replace detraining long-distance riders. The Silver Meteor with its pre-dawn and late night schedules between Richmond and Northeast Corridor cities and the Coast Starlight with its mid-morning and evening schedules between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara are examples of such service. Thus the long-distance train schedule amplifies services of the enhanced urbanized rail corridor.

### **Markets – Vacation Travel**

The market most associated with the long-distance train is vacation trips. These are trips to see the diverse mosaic of the US as well as to visit vacation destinations, like National Parks. One of the features of travel by train is the relaxed time to meet fellow travelers from around the country and around the world. These are much appreciated benefits that cannot be quantified. Vacation travelers make-up a significant portion of the longer distance (+1,000 miles) riders on the trains.

### **Economic Benefits**

Rider, employee and vendor spending associated with travel on the long-distance trains generates approximately \$5 Billion in direct and indirect spending in the cities and towns along their routes. This is a substantial economic impact from the service, especially for small cities working to revitalize their downtown areas.

Finally, the existing long-distance route network preserves the rights and facilities that may be needed at some future period for transportation service expansion. It also preserves a vital national asset in the event of future natural disasters.

So as was noted earlier, it is critical that supporters of the long-distance network keep reminding their members of Congress of the value and importance of the long-distance routes and the need for a return to daily service. Short email from a constituent is a powerful tool of advocacy, like a vote.

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- Eligibility to attend our annual and regional meetings



### Representation and Advocacy

RailPAC presents a strong case to federal, state and local governments for reliable rail services from long-distance trains to commuter operations. Your organization gains strength with a growing membership base and members are invited to review and reflect on proposed changes in budgets, routes and service frequencies.

### Cooperative Alliances

RailPAC works closely with other rail organizations and transit advocacy groups.

### Volunteer Efforts

Members work with local rail passenger groups including Station Hosts at several Amtrak stations, attend and report on meetings of regional and transit boards and write letters to editors of newspapers. Members also submit personal reports of on-board service levels for distribution in Steel Wheels and the weekly e newsletter.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

about RailPAC and how you can help expand and improve passenger rail, visit our website **RailPAC.org** or fill out and return the form on the back page of this newsletter.

### RailPAC.org

Our website includes a complete listing of our current positions, as well as frequent articles and reports from around the state. Visit RailPAC.org to learn more about these and other regional passenger rail projects we support.

### Social Media

To receive the latest rail news from around the state:

- Follow us on Twitter:  
[www.twitter.com/RailPAC](http://www.twitter.com/RailPAC)
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## RAILPAC'S WORK AT-A-GLANCE

RailPAC is working with Amtrak, Caltrans and all agencies involved in achieving the following goals for expanding and extending safe and reliable rail passenger service. We support adequate funding for these services and vigorously promote them.

### High Speed Rail

Build the High Speed Rail system together with electrification for Caltrain and Metrolink.

### Coast Corridor

Reduce travel times. Continue to enhance onboard amenities. Restore connections to Long-Distance trains at Los Angeles Union Station. Reestablish the Coast Daylight between Los Angeles and San Francisco. New stations at Gilroy, Watsonville, Soledad and King City.

### Pacific Surfliner Corridor

Campaign for run through tracks at Los Angeles Union Station to improve punctuality and travel times for Amtrak and Metrolink. Extend service to the Coachella and Imperial valleys.

### Sunset Corridor

Introduce daily service and reestablish service to Florida.

### San Joaquin Corridor

Increase service to and from Sacramento, as well as a new station in Elk Grove. Extend daytime and overnight service to Los Angeles.

### Capitol Corridor

Increase frequency to hourly service between Sacramento and Oakland. Increase frequency of service to San Jose. Extend service to Reno and Redding and Salinas.

### Las Vegas

Reestablish service between Los Angeles and Las Vegas.



# From the Rear Platform, Bits and Pieces from Today's Railroad

by Paul Dyson, Editor

We hear via Dan Leavitt at the RailPAC Annual Meeting that food service on the San Joaquin trains of the future will almost certainly be from vending machines. San Joaquin's one million passengers per year are subsidized to the tune of \$2 million to make up the food service deficit. Where the San Joaquins go the Capitol Corridor will follow as they share the same pool of equipment. The Surfliner café cars may survive longer as this route will receive the bi-level cars cascaded down from the San Joaquins after delivery of the new cars on order from Siemens.



My understanding is that the vending machines will be in a section of one of the cars. Is this a good idea? Yes, if you are servicing the car overnight or en route. It's certainly more convenient for the operator to replenish out of stock items if the cars are all in one place. Not so much if you are

a passenger struggling through two or three cars from and to your seat.

The Japanese know how to do vending machines. In main urban centers you can live your entire life from vending machines if you know where to look. But most passengers buy their food before boarding, the famous Bento boxes for example. I have yet to find an example of hot food vending on a train. Let me know if you have, please.

While some of us old heads recall the fiasco of Southern Pacific's Automat cars using 60s technology, including change machines, we have to acknowledge that the technology has moved on. What has not changed is the tendency of people to spill, to get their credit card stuck, or to drop trash everywhere. SP ended up having an attendant in the car, so a big part of the manpower savings did not materialize. We understand the state's concern for economy, particularly when the state budget is under extreme pressure, but as we have seen with tri-weekly service the savings can be more apparent than real.

## Interagency cooperation.

I was planning to write about timetable coordination between NCTD (Coaster), LOSSAN (Surfliner), SCRRA (Metrolink) and Amtrak (Coast Starlight) during the pandemic. With few fare-paying passengers there have been cuts in service and it seemed to me that there was an opportunity to avoid some of the overlap, and to provide better connections. Well, my observation of the temporary timetables is that there hasn't been any; coordination or cooperation that is. To quote one of many examples, NCTD's Coaster webpage tells you that train

service is roughly halved and informs you that certain tickets are available on the Surfliner. There are six Surfliner trains each way weekdays. Would it have been so hard to show a combined schedule with the Coaster instead of having to look in two places? North of Los Angeles trains are even scarcer and at the beginning of the cuts the Surfliner schedule could easily have advertised the Coast Starlight which filled a big gap in service. Since then Amtrak has shot itself in the foot and made the Starlight thrice weekly. Ah well.

The bigger issue is, what will emerge from the pandemic, and will we do a better job of managing and marketing the very limited passenger rail resources available? I foresee a very parsimonious State Treasurer who will keep the purse strings tightly knotted if riders are slow in coming back, be it for commuting or for leisure and family trips. Keep in mind that, in spite of the agencies putting a brave face on it over the years, passenger rail in California is not a choice made by many people. The combined weekday patronage of the three southern California services is about 35,000, or 70,000 trips. The population is circa 25 million. Work it out for yourselves, readers. We have to make a convincing case to justify rail investment, and we have to make a case that the results will be order of magnitude better than the last twenty five years.

To that end I hope the Biden administration will combine the parts of the federal Railroad Administration and Federal Transit Administration into a single organization. We can then abolish the artificial distinction between commuter and intercity or regional rail. At the same time we can combine the California agencies into two regional authorities to be tasked with integrating services.

That would be a good starting point. Add to that a professional qualification for at least some of the members of their boards.

*Metrolink meets Surfliner at Irvine Station?*

*Can we afford three agencies doing the job of one?*

*Photo - Craig Walker*



# RAIL PASSENGER ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA & NEVADA

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**The RailPAC Mission: *Passenger Rail advocacy, Publications...both print and electronic, Representation at regional meetings, and Rail education.***

Join us! More memberships increase our strength in presenting the case for rail to policymakers at all levels!

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- Weekly eNewsletter and periodic alerts via email
- Eligibility to attend our annual Steel Wheels conference and regional meetings

**MAIL TO: RAILPAC** c/o Marcus Jung  
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