

STEEL WHEELS

PASSENGER RAIL IN CALIFORNIA AND THE WEST

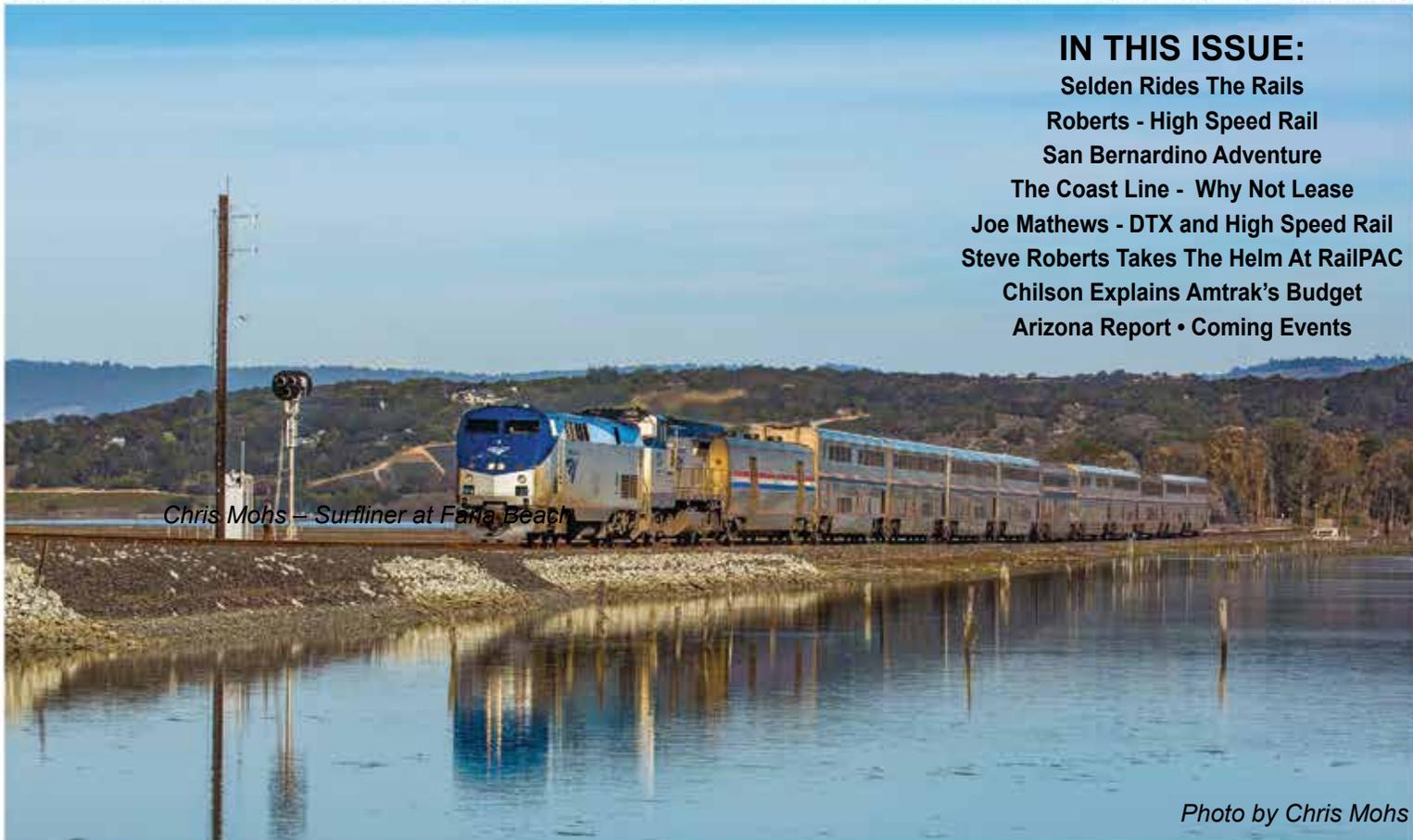
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RAILPAC • ALL ABOARD ARIZONA • PASSENGER RAIL KANSAS • NEW MEXICO RPC • MINNARP • PASSENGER RAIL OKLAHOMA

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Chris Mohs – Surfliner at Faria Beach

Photo by Chris Mohs



Photo by Chris Mohs



Photo by Charles Freericks

2nd QUARTER 2019

PUBLICATION OF THE



RAIL PASSENGER ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA & NEVADA

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**Rail Passenger Association
of California and Nevada**

*A statewide membership organization
working for the improvement and
expansion of passenger rail service.*

Organized in 1977 by a group of passenger rail supporters, RailPAC has been working for over 30 years to establish a network of rail services that will provide service to and throughout California and Nevada.

**We need your support to improve and expand
passenger rail service in the west!**

Your Membership includes...

- **STEEL WHEELS:** Passenger Rail in California and the West
- Weekly newsletter and periodic email alerts
- 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

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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.

RailPAC is a 501c3 Organization therefore all donations are tax deductible.



President's Commentary



Greetings!

As many of you know, at the March RailPAC Board meeting I was elected President of the Rail Passenger Association of California and Nevada. After

more than a decade of enthusiastic service Paul Dyson decided to branch onto a different path in the rail industry. So we all thank him for his dedication and all the best as he embarks on his new adventure. One saving grace (especially for me) is that Paul will remain active in RailPAC where we will be able lean on him for his vast knowledge and wise counsel (and a nagging email when I have forgotten something).

First, I want to thank all the members of the RailPAC Board who have given me this opportunity to serve. I will try to live up to that expectation. I also want to congratulate Board member Doug Kerr on receiving the Jack Martin Passenger Train Advocacy Award from the Rail Passengers Association for his grassroots work in identifying and contacting mayors and city managers to ask for their support for the National Network Trains that stop in their cities and legislative outreach. Doug is an inspiration and model for all of us in grassroots advocacy.



With Doug (L) is RPA Chair Peter LeCody - Photo:RPA

While I have met and conversed with many members, I thought I would provide an overview of my background. Born and raised in Southern California, transportation (and traveling) has always been my passion. I focused on it in college, graduating with a Master's in Transportation from Northwestern University at Evanston, IL. While in graduate school I started working for the Southern Pacific (fireman/hostler on the LA Division) and after graduation worked in SP's Operations Planning Department in San Francisco.

However since my main interest was passenger rail, I quickly moved on to Amtrak starting in the Route Marketing Department in 1976. Route Marketing represented the "intellectual" side of marketing - ridership and ticket revenue analysis, forecasting, market research, pricing, modal competition impacts, etc. Because of my knowledge, I spent most of my time assigned to the western long-distance trains and California Corridors, although I was the Northeast Corridor Route Manager for a couple of years. With the coming of the business units, I relocated to Oakland and Amtrak West working for Gil Mallery and with Brian Rosenwald and others. All challenging, but on the whole, in both Route Marketing and Amtrak West, I worked with a group of fellow employees who were dedicated to quality passenger service.

After retiring I worked for the consulting firm Wilbur Smith (now CDM Smith) on the LOSSAN Strategic Assessment and several state rail plans, including Texas and Louisiana hence my interest in the daily Sunset Ltd.

As you can see from my background I tend toward analysis and long-term strategy. As I move forward as President I hope I can live up to the benchmarks of advocacy that Paul has established. In the near-term I will be assisting and encouraging members in advocacy around the priorities outlined by the Board at the March meeting. These are:

- Los Angeles Union Station Run-Through Tracks – Link-US
- Development and coordination of the Western States National Network Coalition
- Repeal of the Perata Amendment
- Robust state-of-good repair, rebuilding/overhaul of existing Superliners
- Specific funding set aside for the replacement of the unique National Network equipment in the upcoming Amtrak reauthorization legislation
- Daily Sunset LTD. initiative
- Providing input and oversight of Metrolink as it begins planning the implementation of its SCORE initiative

In addition, as part of the Coalition effort I will look at creating tools for grassroots advocacy, thoughts on defining the long-distance trains as part of an overlay of megaregion corridor development and following all trials and challenges of California High Speed Rail. Thank you in advance for all the members help and also patience.

California High Speed Rail

Strategy and Status – Steve Roberts

As I write this it has been about two months since Governor Gavin Newsom's high-speed rail mention in his State of the State speech. To this day I cannot figure out the strategy behind his comments. The Governor basically outlined the parameters of the CAHSRA's 2018 Business Plan adding a few changes. While the 2018 Business Plan left "to be determined" a choice of foundation investments between San Jose and Gilroy or beginning construction Chowchilla – Merced and Wasco – Bakersfield, the Governor specified that the two San Joaquin Valley segments would have priority. The second change was strong reinforcement of the directive that the project needed to move forward on time and on budget. Both of these directives could have been accomplished at the Board level.

This HSR mention set off a firestorm of press reports that completely overshadowed most of the other initiatives in his speech which dealt with his key campaign priorities – housing, homelessness, education, wildfires. On top of that was added the PG&E bankruptcy. Reacting to the headlines the Trump Administration piled on with demands for repayment of federal funds – more headlines. This was not message control so crucial for any governmental enterprise. As I noted above, I still don't understand.

While RailPAC has HSR recommendations as a result of this change, I wanted to provide a high-level overview of the current situation first.

Under construction now is the Madera to Wasco segment. This segment received approximately \$2.5 Billion in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (stimulus) grants to be matched (at least 50%) by California spending. California was allowed to spend all the federal funds first in order to meet the statutory spending deadline of September 30, 2017. Currently Proposition 1A bonds and Cap & Trade are funding construction and will need to equal the federal investment by 2022. Also by 2022 some kind of usable railroad (or test track?) must be constructed.

California also received a second grant in 2010 from the High-Speed Rail Program of almost \$1 Billion. This is the funding the Administration is trying to de-obligate based on non-performance. These funds cannot be spent until California funds are expended to equal federal stimulus funds expended (\$2.5 Billion). Once California matches the first grant the second grant (matched by California) would probably be

used to fully finish the core segment (Madera – Bakersfield). Remaining federal and California funds would then go to the Chowchilla – Merced and Wasco – Bakersfield segments. The second grant has "no completed by" end-date.

At this point, the big issue with a construction project as large and as complex as HSR is that it will be a challenge to spend billions of dollars by 2022. All the "wobble room" has been used up with court challenges and the time to process almost 2,000 properties through the eminent domain process. And CAHSRA has also had to deal with the (your priority is not our priority) Union Pacific, PG&E and AT&T. Hence the Governor's other directive, that CAHSRA management and their contractors have to move forward on time and on budget.

RailPAC's priorities as a result of the Governor's directive to focus exclusively on the core Valley segment Merced to Bakersfield are:



San Joaquin trains at Bakersfield. How soon will we see High Speed Trains there? Photo: Jim Gerstley

First, RailPAC went on record in full support of the pivot to complete the core San Joaquin Valley HSR segment between Bakersfield and Merced. It also highlighted that completion of the full network remain a state priority. To that end it strongly supports completion and approval of all the environmental studies required for Phase I of the statewide project. These studies are an investment laying the foundation for future progress. RailPAC also

emphasized that statewide connectivity is vital in implementing any service using the core segment especially to the Tri-Valley and Silicon Valley via ACE.

RailPAC also recommended that the state should look at near-term commuter rail investments between Gilroy and San Jose that would allow the expansion of Caltrain and Monterey Bay commuter rail as well prepare the rail line (i.e. grade separations) for future high-speed rail. It also asked for legislation to address the barrage of lawsuits weaponizing the California Environmental Quality Act that delays and drives the costs of transportation investments.

As far as proposed operations on the core segment as I write this it is still to be determined. Due for release May 1st is early start operating plan by DB International/CHSRA which may answer some of the questions.

The Siemens logo is displayed in a bold, teal, sans-serif font.

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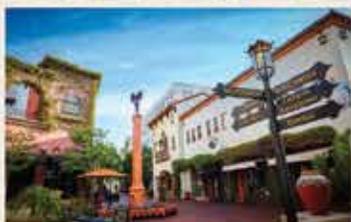
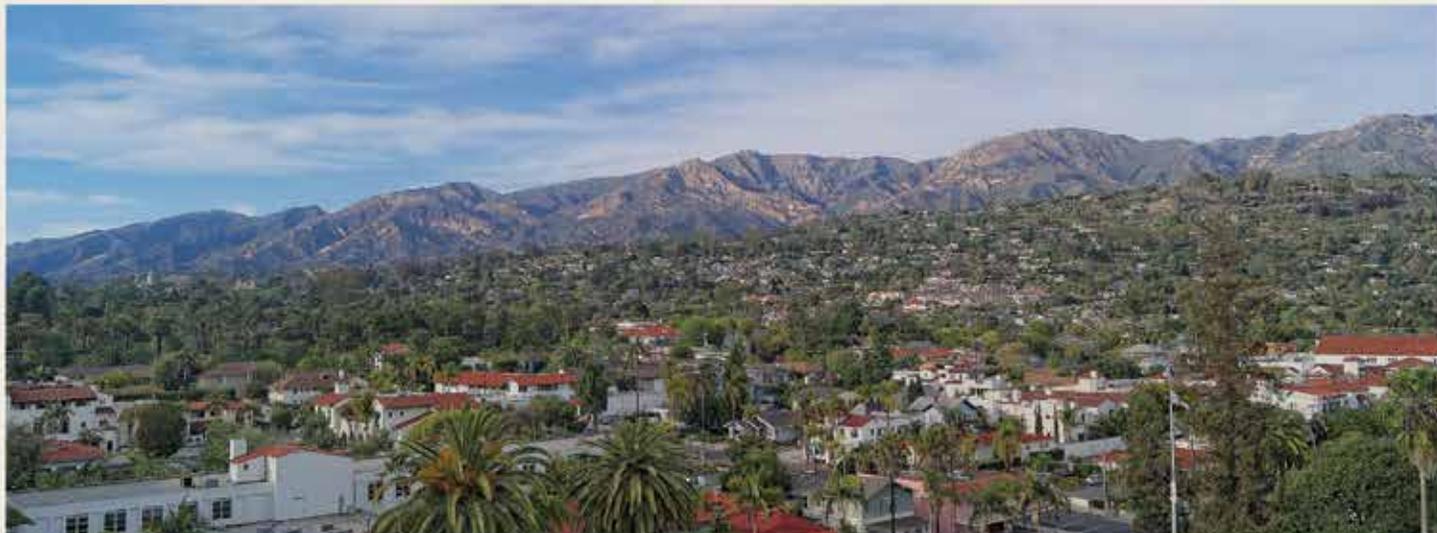
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Santa Barbara Car Free is a cooperative project founded and led by Santa Barbara County Air Pollution Control District for cleaner air and a healthier planet. See OurAir.org.

How Will California Ever Finish High-Speed Rail When It Can't Finish San Francisco's Downtown Rail Extension?

Joe Mathews



Twenty-three years ago, a restaurateur named Gavin Newsom was appointed to his first political gig, as a San Francisco parking-and-traffic commissioner. Back then, a top priority of San Francisco transportation officials was a proposed 1.3 mile-rail line called the Downtown Rail Extension, or DTX, to connect the city's commuter rail station with downtown.

DTX Embodies California's Transportation Failures

All these years later, DTX still is little more than a proposal, vital but unrealized. still. As such, it embodies the massive failure of transportation execution Newsom now confronts in California.

The history of the DTX also demonstrates that, for all the state's struggles to build big infrastructure projects, California is even worse at the little stuff. We've constructed two rail lines that reach the edge of LAX, but don't enter the airport. Disneyland has its own railroad and monorail but no rail link to the park itself. San Diego's signature trolley doesn't go to its world-famous zoo.

Newsom Squeaks Like a Mouse on Infrastructure

This may tell us something about Newsom's deep skepticism about high-speed rail and other transportation projects. For all the governor's lion-like roars about the need for transformational projects in health care, education, and housing, he has squeaked like a mouse when it comes to infrastructure.

Since he first encountered DTX as a rookie public official, Newsom has seen some projects progress with struggle (like the Central Subway in San Francisco) while others failed. And he's seen newly elected officials intervene to impose their own vision on major construction projects. Governors Pete Wilson and Arnold Schwarzenegger both stalled the new east span of the Bay Bridge to reconsider it — in the process adding to delays on the scandalously expensive project. The east span was such a disaster that Gov. Jerry Brown and other top officials wouldn't attend its 2013 opening. It was left to Newsom, then the lieutenant governor, to handle the ceremony.

There are huge lessons to be drawn from California's transportation failures, large and small. Every project needs a clear and accountable champion. Successful projects require dedicated staffs with technical expertise and real power; too many projects rely on too many expensive and unaccountable outside consultants. Such

projects need realistic budgets, more financial commitment from taxpayers, and far greater urgency. DTX has none of these things.

DTX's Latest Pricetag Is \$6.1 Billion for 1.3 Miles

Neither does high-speed rail. And if the bullet train ends up diminished or dead, Newsom can console himself with this: It won't be nearly as bad a failure as DTX. The latest estimates for that 1.3-mile project, which includes a couple of new stations, have ballooned to \$6.1 billion.

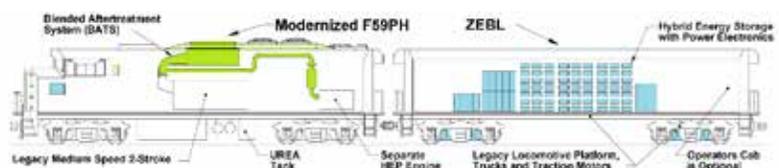
High-speed rail may be an \$80 billion project, but if it were as expensive per-mile as DTX, connecting Los Angeles to San Francisco would cost over \$2 trillion.

Joe Mathews writes for Zocalo Public Square and other publications, and this column is reprinted with permission.



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The California Coast – Part 2

In the first quarter edition of Steel Wheels Steve Roberts suggested it was time to make a deal.

In part 2 of our review of this issue we are reprinting an editorial by Noel Braymer from 2012 which is equally relevant today.

Why Not Lease the Coast Line?

Opinion by Noel T. Braymer



Coast Starlight at Pajaro - Nearby, at Elkhorn Slough, the line is only 4 feet above sea level. Photo: Charles Freericks

For at least the next 25 years Amtrak is leasing 95 miles of railroad from CSX, part of the Empire Corridor in upstate New York. The reasons for doing this are so that Amtrak can dispatch their own trains to improve their on-time performance and have a free hand in installing up to 191 million dollars in track improvements mostly from Federal Grant monies. Why can't California get a deal like this? Where such an arrangement is most needed in California is on the roughly 360 miles of the Coast Line between Ventura County and San Jose. There is a large potential market along the coast of California for more Rail Passenger service but progress expanding service has been very slow. The root of the problem stems from resistance from the owner; the Union Pacific Railroad which has made it clear its management isn't interested in Rail Passenger service.

Why would leasing the Coast Line be in the best interest of the UP? Clearly the UP has no interest to sell the Coast Line or any part of its system. Railroads use their rights of way for more than running trains. Railroad rights of way are also used for fiber optic cables, pipelines and other utilities. Ownership of land next to the railroad generates revenue. Also holding on to rights of way which are irreplaceable gives the railroads capacity for future growth. By leasing, not selling the Coast Line the UP would hold on to the long-term value of their asset. Also, by leasing, the railroads can let the government deal with the headaches of maintenance, legal liability, emergency repairs from disasters etc. Getting a check every month from the government for lease payments wouldn't hurt either.

The Coast Line is a secondary freight carrier. It has for years been primarily a passenger carrier with the San Joaquin Line the primary freight hauler. It is available to relieve the San Joaquin Line when needed due to congestion, but most of the time the UP doesn't have much traffic on it*. The Coast Line is in much better shape under the UP than it was under the SP 30 years ago. Still it is an expensive line to maintain. Much of it is wedged between the ocean and cliffs. Erosion is a constant problem with the ocean undermining the tracks and there is the threat of landslides from nearby cliffs and hillsides. Recent history has seen an increase in violent storms which create much damage to infrastructure, particularly in low lying areas near water such as in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties where the Coast Line runs.

So why should government want to lease the Coast Line? Because it is much cheaper to lease and fix up an existing railroad than to build a new one or a new freeway. Government is responsible for most infrastructure and emergency services. The primary transportation corridors in the state are the I-5/99 corridor and the 101. Both are already busy and demand for future transportation continues to grow. In a major emergency either or both corridors could shut down for days or longer. A major problem in an emergency is when transportation is shut down in the affected area help can't be brought in or people evacuated. Creating a viable alternative to the 101 Highway along the Coast is needed and doable using the Coast Line. But the Coast Line will have to be upgraded and improved to be less vulnerable to floods and landslides.



Union Pacific Guadalupe Turn at Emma Wood State Beach west of Ventura. Freight Trains are now a rarity on the Coast Line. Photo: Charles Freericks

Surfliner on the bluffs at Summerland - Expensive Right of Way to Maintain - Photo: Chris Mohs



What kind of service should we have on the Coast Line? The Coast Line is considered a future High Speed Rail Corridor by the Federal Railroad Administration. 200 miles per hour is not feasible but speeds up to 125 miles per hour are viable on much of the route. With extensive double tracking and improved signaling regular local and express service would provide a high level of passenger rail service with enough capacity still available for freight. In addition to almost hourly service and the current Coast Starlight an overnight train to the Bay Area could either be an extension of the California Zephyr or a new train that transfers cars to the Zephyr. As part of the lease we should also get a second frequency of the Starlight leaving Los Angeles in the afternoon and arriving in the day. Leasing would also improve local service including commuter service in the Santa Barbara region and expanded service between Ventura County and Los Angeles.

Who should lease the Coast Line from the UP? It could be Amtrak, or the State of California with Caltrans or a new body to administer it. What is important is not so much who runs it but how it is run. Leasing and operating a railroad is expensive. With any successful capital intensive enterprise the key to success is getting as much use out of your capital as possible. That means running as many trains as the line is capable of that produce revenue. By leasing the Coast Line there is an incentive to run more service with connections to increase revenue passenger miles to pay the bills. This would encourage expanding all services including more Caltrain and Capitol Corridor trains south of San Jose to Gilroy and Salinas with connections to Monterey.

December 15th, 2012

***Editor's note.** Noel wrote this nearly seven years ago and in that time the volume of freight traffic on the line has fallen even further. See SW 1Q19 for details. RailPAC is leading a campaign to bring these ideas to the attention of the California State Transportation Agency and the various regional rail boards that already control parts of the route.

Bring back the Car Float? The Salinas turn crosses Elkhorn Slough - Photo: Chris Mohs



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 pdyson@railpac.org.

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

Rail Odyssey

Commentary by Andrew Selden



Amtrak 27, Portland section of the Empire Builder - at Lyle, WA - Photo: Chris Mohs

In late February my wife and I undertook a three-week, 5,800-mile, great circle loop around the West, mostly by Amtrak.

We attempted to book the trip on Amtrak's website -- it can't be done. The site just doesn't allow long, multi-segment, multi-thousand dollar, trips like this. I tried calling the 800 number, but gave up and drove to St. Paul Union Depot where two friendly agents stitched together my booking. In the lowest of off-season periods, sleeping cars were already selling out two months in advance of travel. These passengers, according to Amtrak CEO Richard Anderson, don't exist.

No. 8(21)/No. 59(21) No. 59 has a deadheading Sightseer Lounge car, two coaches, an unstaffed Sightseer Lounge, a Cross-Country Café (diner, sort of, plus snack bar. Overnight to Memphis, CN's ex-Illinois Central track is very rough.

The café car (that serves as a diner) is staffed with only one person. Tobias, a busy fellow with a cheery attitude, makes the best of a poorly-designed food service solely intended to limit Amtrak's costs.

We leave 30 minutes late, encounter terminal congestion in South Memphis and repair to the unstaffed Sightseer Lounge. Much land in Mississippi is flooded. One shallow lake has a circle of fledgling white pelicans. In these poor counties, we see few people, many decayed towns, cars and rural buildings.

The bedrooms stay occupied to New Orleans. Coaches are perhaps half full—a pattern we will see on every train we ride.

No. 1(27) The Sunset has two P-42s, baggage, dorm, one sleeper, standard diner and Sightseer, and two coaches. A half hour out of New Orleans, the car attendant announces that the toilets in the first coach are inoperative.

Speeds vary widely, between 35 and 70, for no obvious reason. There is no freight traffic on the line at all. We limp out of New Iberia 90 minutes late. The crew says we will make it up by

Houston (we don't).

Lunch in the diner is handled easily in two small sittings. This is our first exposure to Amtrak's new menu. The Angus Burger is still the "A" choice at lunch, but the big salad turns out to be really good, too.

You know you've entered Texas when the landscape suddenly dries out. We retire early, and sleep through the long dwell and switching in San Antonio. We enjoy breakfast, as dawn breaks over the desert, the best meal in the diner, actually cooked to order.

Approaching El Paso, we see the long-existing border fence as a black line slowly converging with us as we run up the Rio Grande valley. Pecan tree orchards bracket the track. We climb up to the flat desert plateau of southern New Mexico.

Long after dark, at about 11:15 PM, we reach Tucson, a half hour late on the very soft temporary schedule, due entirely to UP's inept dispatching.

No train service is available for days leaving Tucson. We fly to Los Angeles.

#14(04) At 8:15 AM Los Angeles' fabled Union Station is a busy, happening place. Completed in 1939 in neo-Spanish Colonial style architecture, and the scene of many movies and TV productions, it has undergone a huge clean-up and restoration.

At 9:32 we watch No. 14 back in to the platform for its 10:10 departure. The train carries two P42s, a baggage car, dorm, two sleepers, diner, business class coach, Sightseer and two coaches. Like our other trains, the sleepers are mostly full, the coaches much less so.

To watch the ocean north of Ventura, we head straight to the Sightseer. At 10:15, a PA announcement says "we are holding for



Amtrak Customer's enjoying the scenery. Hobbyists? They look like rail passengers to me - Photo: Andrew Selden

a connecting train.” At 10:44, a seriously stupid text from Amtrak advises of train 14’s estimated arrival in Los Angeles. At 10:50 AM, a two-hour late Sunset Limited rolls in, and at 11:03 we leave, 53 minutes late.

In a PA announcement prohibited by Amtrak’s Customer Service Standards manual, the conductor tells passengers to stay in their seats or rooms until their tickets have been scanned. He omits basic safety advisories and any “Welcome aboard.”

In bright sunshine we have a perfect view of the Santa Barbara channel and islands comprising its national park. My wife spots a whale breaching. Still, most passengers, even in the lounge car, are buried in their laptops, smartphones or books. They are ordinary Americans trying to get somewhere, via their mode of choice. Richard Anderson never rides these trains and wouldn’t know this.

The Starlight lost its unique Pacific Parlour Car a year ago—thanks to Mr. Anderson. It picked up a “business class” car, a Superliner with leather-faced seats -- basically just a premium-fare coach. This train’s onboard service crew was trapped for 36 hours the previous weekend in the Cascade Mountains in Oregon in a blizzard. We hear some of their stories.

Beyond San Luis Obispo, the conductors, if any, are totally invisible and silent. At 4:37 on the famous Cuesta Grade we roll by the southbound Starlight, No. 11, which is stopped waiting for us. We are still 53 minutes late. We have not seen a single UP freight since leaving Los Angeles, and won’t, all the way to near Oakland. At dinner, I am able to order without looking at the now-memorized menu. We arrive Oakland about 40 minutes late.

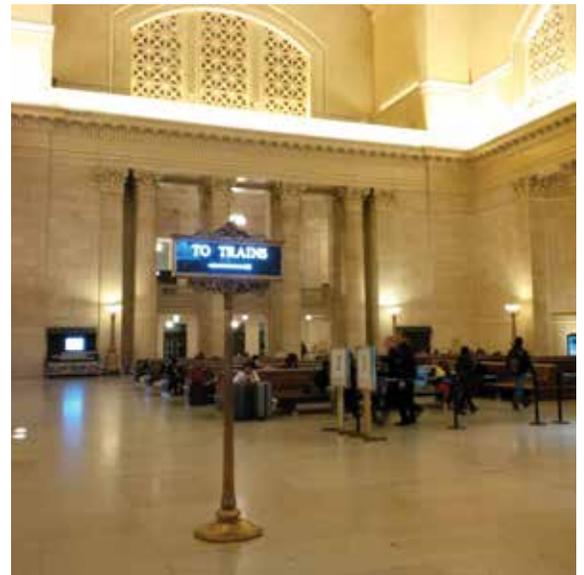
No. 14(05) After a visit with family, we are back at the Oakland station. It feels like a big-city bus depot, deep in a scary warehouse district. There are only a half dozen people in the station. The two Amtrak agents are secured behind solid barriers of bullet-proof glass. Our No. 14 is expected on time at 9:24 PM, but so is a delayed San Joaquin train. We board and go before the San Joaquin shows up.

In the morning, in the mountains in northern California light rain falls over fresh snow. At 8:55, we stop at Klamath Lake for a southbound UP train, led by the colorful UP heritage unit painted in early SP livery. At 9:55, the diner’s lead service attendant (LSA) announces dinner will be served only between 5:00 and 5:30, though the train won’t reach Seattle until well after 8 PM.

The snow gets deeper as we climb out of Chemult. One passenger has staked out a booth in the nearly-full Sightseer, blocking three seats with her luggage so she can sleep on the table. The Conductor ignores this. The run up the Willamette River valley is uneventful but slow, and we reach Portland at 4:17.

No. 28(09) We return to Portland Union Station at 3:35 PM for our 4:45 departure. The Empire Builder arrived on time this morning, but has not been washed during its layover at Portland and all the windows are filthy, some so much so that it is not easy to see out of them. Is this part of Amtrak’s secret strategy to drive away customers?

We are away on time, and catch great views of Mt. Hood, and Portland, crossing the Willamette River, then the Columbia River before making a brief stop at Vancouver, Washington. As with every other Sightseer car we ride, this one has the only restroom in the car blocked off by the employees. Why does Amtrak allow this?



*Chicago’s Union Station. The sign says it all.
Photo: Andrew Selden*

The Columbia River gorge is spectacular in bright afternoon sunshine. Darkness overtakes us around 7:30. Later, we are early into Spokane, and No. 8 is late. We see the Seattle section in the morning—baggage, dorm, two sleepers, diner and only one coach (and it is far from full). We wonder again why Amtrak never advertises these off-season trains.

We leave Whitefish and head up through Columbia Falls and up the Middle Fork of the Flathead River towards Glacier National Park and Marias Pass. Extremely dirty windows in the sunny Sightseer Lounge make it all but impossible to see out.

The combined train has three P42s. Even seasonally short one Seattle coach, the Builder is still Amtrak’s longest western train, with three and a half sleepers (including the extra roomettes in the dorm car) and three coaches. This train consistently produces the most ticket revenue of any single Amtrak train.

Near the summit of the Pass, we run into a big time traffic jam, involving no fewer than seven more BNSF trains. But BNSF dispatchers have been getting their own trains off the main so that the Empire Builder can have first shot at clearing the jam.

At breakfast, we learn that we have detoured overnight on the so-called Surrey Cutoff diagonally from Minot to West Fargo. Between Detroit Lakes and Staples, we slow to 10 MPH, and are promptly overtaken on the left by a coal train! We pass two westbound grain trains, then quickly accelerate to 70. BNSF dispatchers keep the Empire Builder moving.

With first light putting a glow in the eastern sky, we roll into St. Paul Union Depot at about 9:50, just over two hours late and just shy of three weeks since we left.

All Aboard Arizona

– Tony Trifiletti –

At the end of our last episode, I said “Stay tuned” for future developments on the Valley Metro Rail saga in Phoenix.

The well-heeled financial interests that killed light rail in Nashville turned up and got an initiative on the ballot to put an end to any further light rail projects in Phoenix, the core of which is the South Central Avenue extension. The initiative is scheduled to go before the voters on the August ballot.



*Rail in Arizona under threat - Light rail train in downtown Phoenix
- Photo: All Aboard Arizona*

A critical analysis of the language of the anti-light rail initiative shows that it would have a disastrous effect on all issues related to passenger rail in the region.

- It would kill the South Central Avenue Valley Metro Rail extension, but that's just jacks for openers.
- It would amend the Phoenix City Charter, which means that it can't be corrected in the future.
- It would terminate all planned light rail extensions and redistribute those funds to highways.
- It would upset all existing regional arrangements by redistributing all monies generated by Proposition 104 to highways. Although this vote is restricted to Phoenix voters, the effects would be felt throughout Maricopa County. Its aim is to kill rail of all kinds.
- It would require the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) to reallocate funds marked for rail to go to highways for their 2022 ballot referendum. There would be no further light rail expansion and no future commuter rail at all!
- It would require the rejection of federal funds for light rail and future commuter rail.
- It would cause Phoenix to have an outsized role in regional transportation planning, thus restricting MAG's plans and activities.
- It would send our federal dollars to Seattle and Los Angeles where ground is now being broken for substantial extensions of their existing light rail systems. We have nothing against either Los Angeles or Seattle, but we need our light rail!
- It would destroy everything that All Aboard Arizona has done for the past 18 months to further commuter and intercity rail in Arizona.

But there is good news. The Arizona General Contractors Association filed suit to throw the initiative off the ballot on grounds of fraud. There is also the state constitutional issue of whether one city can disrupt a regional plan.

The other piece of good news is that key players in the region are not sitting idly by. Polling, fundraising and other work to defeat the initiative are proceeding. Friends of Transit, a Phoenix-based organization that played a critical role in getting light rail started, is taking the lead on this effort and is organizing informational sessions throughout Phoenix. We've made our Phoenix members aware of this.

To add insult to injury, the northwest extension of Valley Metro Rail was killed by the

Phoenix City Council due to a citizens' petition submitted for that purpose.

- This vote removes the incentive to vote to retain light rail in August.
- Each proposed extension could be killed on a one-by-one basis via petition.
- As pro-rail people retire from the City Council, the new mayor, who is strongly pro-rail, could be left standing alone without allies.

Keep an eye on this one.

We at All Aboard Arizona met with our RailPAC counterparts in Oakland to discuss a Western Interstate Trains Coalition to keep Amtrak's national network whole and get Congress to appropriate the money necessary to renew the equipment that keeps those trains rolling. The oldest Superliner equipment has gained the reputation of being “maintenance shops on wheels.” The Trump Administration wishes to reduce Amtrak's budget, concentrate on the Northeast Corridor, and emphasize corridors of 750 miles or less to be equipped with Diesel Multiple Unit (DMU) rolling stock. There is no plan to renew the national network, increase service or replace its aging equipment. This is nothing less than a plan to incrementally eliminate every route west of the Mississippi River! Our joint goal is to build grassroots support for refurbishing and ultimately replacing the equipment that drives the western trains and keep them rolling.

We're going to Yuma later this month to meet with the Mayor and the Greater Yuma Economic Development Corporation to bring them up to speed on the threat to their city from the current Amtrak five-year operating plan and to get them to support daily service on the *Sunset Limited*.

Stay tuned.



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Amtrak's FY 2020 Grant Request

Analysis

By George Chilson

Amtrak's grant request for FY 2020 is more comprehensive and detailed than any I have seen in my 20 years of rail advocacy. It contains many excellent ideas plus they present it in the context of a five-year plan. We should complement them on this very professional work.

The request contains many new and excellent ideas that I think that we should endorse:

The idea of a dedicated "trust fund."

- Amtrak proposes one dedicated to Amtrak.
- I suggest the broader concept of "passenger rail."
- The "pay for" would be an increase in the federal gas tax that's supported by the National Chamber of Commerce.

In the alternative, the idea of getting Congress to approve "Advance Appropriations" for the next five years.

The inclusion of "inflation adjusted" numbers for years beyond 2020. This is a highly creative way to "pre-sell" larger appropriations in future years.

The ranking of additional initiatives that tells Congress what higher appropriations would buy.

The proposal for Amtrak to have a "private right of action" in resolving OTP problems with the railroads.

The request contains some "red flags":

- While PTC equivalent measures are being implemented, Amtrak still says it intends to install PTC over 100% of its system, regardless of whether the FRA or common sense says it is needed. Will Amtrak waste taxpayer funds installing PTC on low volume routes, or will it once again seek to eliminate routes like the Chief, the Zephyr and Vermonter?
- Amtrak's projection that "operations" will breakeven in 2021 and begin generating a surplus thereafter. This projection strongly suggests that Amtrak has no intention of expanding long distance services and every intention of contracting them.
- Amtrak's intent to provide proposals for FAST Act reauthorization by the end of calendar 2019. All proposals in the five-year equipment plan are contingent on the changes in route structure and frequencies Amtrak will propose (and if Congress approves).

The request contains a highly toxic proposal that I believe we should oppose:

The proposal to transfer \$280 million of the 2020 grant request from National Network account to NEC account. This proposal is objectionable for a number of reasons:

It throws into doubt all of the allocations contained in the 2020 grant request because Amtrak based these budget projections on the assumption that they would use the federal grant as

allocated between NEC and National Network by the FAST Act authorization;

It is contrary to the Congressional intent expressed in the FAST Act authorization;

It has the effect of double charging the National Network for NEC infrastructure access:

- Amtrak already uses its controversial APT route accounting system to assess the East Coast State Supported (i.e. Virginia) and East Coast Long distance business lines (i.e. Silver Service) using the NEC with the cost of infrastructure access. This is somewhat similar to host railroad payments.
- Now Amtrak proposes to use this same flawed allocation methodology using the same "cost drivers": train miles, ton miles, number of departures, etc. to shift more NEC infrastructure costs to "eastern state supported" and eastern long-distance routes. They're asking for a second bite of the apple and this sounds similar to what Amtrak tried in the early 80's.

The methodology produces an amount that does not seem justifiable in any rational way; \$280 million amounts to \$187 per National Network train mile operated over the NEC.

The transfer will have a cascading, negative effect on the federally supported interstate services (a/k/a "Long Distance"):

- The "Long Distance" business line accounts for 59% of the total grant request for the National Network;
- Amtrak designates 59% of the \$1.2 billion grant request for the National Network to its Long Distance business line. It allocates the \$702.3 million to the following purposes:
 - \$235.3 million to Operations;
 - \$317.9 to Equipment;
 - \$55.3 to Infrastructure;
 - \$93.9 to Stations.
- If applied proportionately (59%), the \$280 million reallocation to the NEC will reduce the amount of federal support for "Long Distance" by \$165 million;
- Unless Amtrak plans to eliminate routes, the amount for operations is mandatory so the full \$165 million cut will have to be taken from other categories, most likely equipment since much if not most is "discretionary."
- If this happens, funding for desperately needed general maintenance, overhauls and "refreshes" will drop by 52% — from \$318 million to \$153 million.
- Amtrak budgeted \$67.5 million for "multi-level" overhauls in 2020 — down \$14.1 million from 2019, which, given the currently observed condition of the equipment, is inadequate.
- If applied proportionately, Superliner overhauls in 2020

would drop from \$81.6 million in 2019 to \$32.4 million - a 61% cut. The impact on reliability, capacity, availability and customer appeal of the equipment used to operate trains in the Western US would be seriously degraded.

The proposed funding for incremental appropriations has no appeal for most Members of Congress.

Of the first suggested appropriation increase of \$181 million, Amtrak proposes to spend 88% on NEC projects. Of the second suggested increase of \$500 million, Amtrak proposes to spend more than half on NEC projects and virtually nothing on investments that would benefit states west of the Mississippi other than new locomotives. If we could persuade Amtrak to be more national in its outlook and strategy, it would help us generate more support in Congress where parochial perspectives dominate voting considerations. That probably requires Congress to cease pressing Amtrak to “minimize” operating “subsidies.”

Advocates should urge Congress to:

Increase funding for passenger rail and transit:

- Amtrak - \$1.4 billion for national network, \$750 million for Northeast Corridor, total \$2.15 billion.
- CRISI - \$600 million
- Federal/State Partnership for state of good repair \$500 million
- Restoration & enhancement grants - \$20 million
- Transit Formula Grants \$11.4 billion
- Capital Investment Grants \$3.8 billion

Prohibit Amtrak from transferring any money from the National Network to the NEC.

On time performance – allow Amtrak to take complaints about railroad performance directly to the STB – a “private right of action.”

Create a trust fund with a dedicated revenue stream; alternatively provide “advance appropriations” for passenger rail grants.

Equipment –

- Direct Amtrak to spend no less than half of its total budget for overhauls (budgeted at \$1.38 billion through 2024) to “refresh and overhaul” the aging bi-level fleet that’s the current backbone of almost all intercity passenger rail service west of the Mississippi. (currently budgeted at only 29%).
- OTP. In addition to enabling Amtrak to take legal action against the railroads, they also need to have a more constructive solution in their toolbox for dealing the OTP problem.

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2019 RailPAC Annual Meeting and Steel Wheels Conference will take place at the Old Spaghetti Factory in Fullerton.

The restaurant is located adjacent to the Fullerton Amtrak Station at 110 E Santa Fe in Fullerton. The restaurant occupies the old Union Pacific Depot. Further details in the next edition and at www.railpac.org See you there, and come by train!

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San Bernardino Adventure Plenty of Time to Think Radical Thoughts



**April 1st 2019
Burbank**

Unfortunately, the date is coincidental. There is no "April Fool" element to this

story, just the facts that you can easily check.

Tomorrow I have a meeting at San Bernardino, starting at 1.30pm and, amazingly, the meeting is AT THE DEPOT! If I take the train, there is no last mile gap to overcome. Step off the train, walk along the platform, and I've arrived. Time to look at the Metrolink website and check my train times. Traveling from Downtown Burbank, served by both Ventura County and Antelope Valley lines, there should be plenty of trains to connect with the more or less hourly service on the San Bernardino line.

Before I open my laptop I check my 'phone to see what the road journey would be like. At 8.25 on a Monday morning the 64-mile drive is estimated to take 64 minutes.

Over to Metrolinktrains.com and I plug in my origin and destination. Here's where the average traveler looks for his car keys. The only train quoted on the journey planner to arrive by 1.30pm is train 306 from LAUS at 1019, arriving at 1158am. And to connect with that train the trip planner says I must take VC line train 110 at 9.22am! Add in the short hop from my house and we're talking 4.5 hours journey time, or about 14 miles per hour. But I'm not satisfied with the answer because is there not an hourly service and is there not a train that arrives at San Bernardino at about 1.00pm? Back to the website where I look just for San Bernardino line trains, with the thought that, worst case, I could drive to LAUS and take



A Metrolink train leaves the short siding at CP Fremont in Alhambra. From here it's single track all the way to El Monte. Does Metro have the guts to take a freeway line and add a second track? Photo by Charles Freericks.

the train from there.

Lo and behold, Train 308 departs LAUS at 1106 and arrives San Bernardino at 1252pm, somewhat early for the meeting but tolerable. Is there really nothing from Burbank to make that connection? Next, I look at the Burbank to LAUS trains. AV line Train 210 departs Burbank 0952, arrives LAUS 1013, so nearly an hour to wait. AV line 212 departs Burbank 1049, arrives LAUS at 1108, just in time to see the tail marker of the San Bernardino train. Train 210, the 0952 departure is thus the best train for my meeting, even though it is not shown in the route planner. 212 would be better, but even if retimed to make the connection with 308 to San Bernardino, I'm not sure if I would trust it, given the recent punctuality performance of Metrolink and Surfliner here in southern California. Of course, you will have noticed that 210 arrives LAUS 6 minutes before



Metrolink at CP Marengo, East Los Angeles. The tracks are squeezed in by Interstate 10 and the El Monte busway. Consideration for future rail needs? ZERO! Photo by Charles Freerick

306 departs. More on that later.

Against all logic I am electing to take the train. There is *only* a 45-minute wait after the meeting for a train home and a reasonable connection means *only* a three hour fifteen minute journey, station to station. The senior discount should work out cheaper than gas at nearly \$4 per gallon. I'll continue the story tomorrow, dear reader, with pictures!

April 2nd.

I'm wavering. If I drove I would have more than two hours of office time before having to leave to work on this edition of Steel Wheels, among other tasks. But I decide to dedicate the day to travel research, arm myself with books*, some energy bars and a phone charger and head for the downtown Burbank Station. I take what is almost the last spot in the south side lot. Most of the parking is taken up by aspiring actors going to Central Casting a couple of blocks away, or employees of the Burbank

Power plant. The ticket machine is working and because it is morning I can actually read the screen. (In the afternoon the sun from the west makes it unreadable). I purchase my \$14 round trip senior ticket, a bargain at about 10c per mile traveled. Train 210 is on time at 0952 and almost empty. About a dozen people board at Burbank, and as many get off.

We arrive a couple of minutes early at LAUS despite creeping into the station at the customary 10mph or so. The departure board indicates that 306 has not departed so I elect to take it and spend the extra hour at San Bernardino rather than wait in L.A. for 308. Years of train travel have taught me to take the first train going towards my destination, usually with the best results. Apparently 6 minutes in the timetable is too short a time for the Metrolink trip planner to offer it as a connection, even though inbound Ventura County and Antelope Valley trains have about 10 minutes of recovery time from Glendale.

After leaving Union Station and crossing the [Los Angeles River](#), the line follows the [San Bernardino Freeway](#) and [El Monte Busway](#) until just after the Cal State L.A. station; it then runs in the median of the San Bernardino Freeway to the El Monte Station along the former route of the [Pacific Electric Railway's San Bernardino Line](#). Starting at El Monte, the line parallels the [Union Pacific's Sunset Route \(ex-Southern Pacific\)](#) for a few miles before turning northeast at Bassett onto a Southern Pacific branch. A little further east (at a former Southern Pacific/[Pacific Electric-Santa Fe](#) crossing), it switches to the Santa Fe; from Claremont to just west of San Bernardino it follows what was the Santa Fe's [Pasadena Subdivision](#) (and before that the Second District of the LA Division, the Santa Fe passenger main line). The San Bernardino Line is mostly [single track](#) with 6 [passing sidings](#) and short sections of [double track](#) near



California's Past repurposed - a packing house at Upland, CA converted for office space. Photo: Paul Dyson

Covina, between Pomona and Montclair, and west of Fontana.

306 is also almost empty but does steady business of a few on and a few off at every station. But what a drag. A combination of slow acceleration, long dwell time at stations, and single-

track meets makes for a tedious 103 minutes station to station. A surprise for me was the number of people alighting at Rancho Cucamonga; I'll have to find out why.

San Bernardino today is gorgeous, temperature in the mid-sixties, snow on the mountains and a light breeze. The beautiful old depot is well restored and maintained but almost deserted. The Amtrak agent has been removed and there are few information resources for the low-tech traveler. I grab a sandwich and coffee at the snack bar in the depot and sit down to read about transit in New Zealand and Switzerland and watch operations at the adjacent intermodal terminal.

The meeting over I step outside for a 45-minute wait for my train. Instead of the usual hour between trains there's a 97-minute gap in the early afternoon and of course I fell into it. But we are on time and the train home (M329) is better patronized than this morning's eastbound, (Rancho Cucamonga taking the prize again) with folks getting on and off at all the stations. A slow but otherwise uneventful ride brings us finally to LAUS at 5.00pm with time to transit the tunnel to track 4B for train 119 back to Burbank at 5.10pm. This train was about 60-70% occupied, hardly a crush load for the middle of the evening peak.

We arrived at Burbank on time to see about three dozen people alighting, and a similar number joining the train. A short drive home, and it was well past time for a cup of tea.

Some observations and comparisons

It was a pleasant, sunny, temperate day and I'm sure that improved my mood. As one of my old British Railways bosses would have said, a good day for swanning around the district. At 10c per mile and free parking at the station I had no complaints about the cost of the trip. I was therefore reasonably tolerant of the shortcomings of the service I had chosen to use.

The Schedule

If Metrolink had been in operation just a couple of years I suppose the lack of connectivity at LAUS could be forgiven. But here we are after more than 25 years of service and the message has not yet sunk in; not everyone is going to or from downtown Los Angeles. I am a railroad veteran and I do understand the difficulty of scheduling single track railroads, train crews and rolling stock. Yet given the bare bones service still offered on most routes I just cannot accept that we cannot do better. No rational person would spend eight hours away from the office to attend a one hour meeting unless gasoline were rationed or some other dire circumstance prevailed. The midday drive, even with a typical delay from a fender bender, would be unlikely to exceed 90 minutes each way. Peak hour it could be two hours, but that is door to door. And how many travelers' destinations are at the depot?

The Seats

The commuter style seats, especially in the newer Rotem-built cars, are designed for about a 5-mile trip. If you are taller than 5ft 6in or ever so slightly portly, these are not the seats for you. The legroom standard was taken direct from the

Delta Airlines manual, section, economy coach. Fortunately, the trains were lightly loaded so I had a 4-section to myself except for the last leg between LAUS and Burbank. Perhaps the slow decline in patronage is at least caused by the discomfort suffered, especially by those traveling longer distances. Given the width available within the generous North American loading gauge I really don't know why the seats have to be so narrow. Amtrak's aren't. By the way, anyone suggesting extending Metrolink service to Palm Springs should be strapped into one of these seats for two hours while they reconsider. Seriously though, perhaps Metrolink should consider removing some seats, or even instituting a higher class of travel for long distance patrons.



Framed by the "cloisters" at San Bernardino Depot, Metrolink 856 en route to the new downtown station. Photo: Paul Dyson

On Board Security and Ticket Check

My ticket was checked only once the whole day. I traveled in the quiet car and no attempt was made to enforce it. I saw a conductor or assistant once outbound and twice on the return trip. This is not good enough.

Comparisons

The route is about the same length as Caltrain between San Jose and San Francisco (56.5 miles vs 49.2). Los Angeles is much larger than San Francisco but San Bernardino is only a fourth of the size of San Jose. The line serves Cal State Los Angeles (CSLA) and Claremont McKenna, and will eventually extend to UC Redlands. There are many smaller cities along the route with populations close to the stations. Parallel freeways are heavily congested, just like the Peninsula. Weekday patronage on Caltrain is about 65,000, the Metrolink San Bernardino line attracts about 9,500. In general there is much more of a tradition of rail commuting into San Francisco, and in general the population is more affluent along that line.

The Future

The route, as described above, is heavily constrained by single track sections that in some cases can only be improved at very great expense. Unlike the old Southern Pacific peninsula route the San Bernardino line was cobbled together from three different routes that were purchased from their original owners in 1992. Between Los Angeles and El Monte the line is hemmed in by Interstate 10 and the busway, with a short passing siding in Alhambra in the middle of 12 lanes of freeway. San Bernardino County has plans to add two sections of double track but these are a few years away.

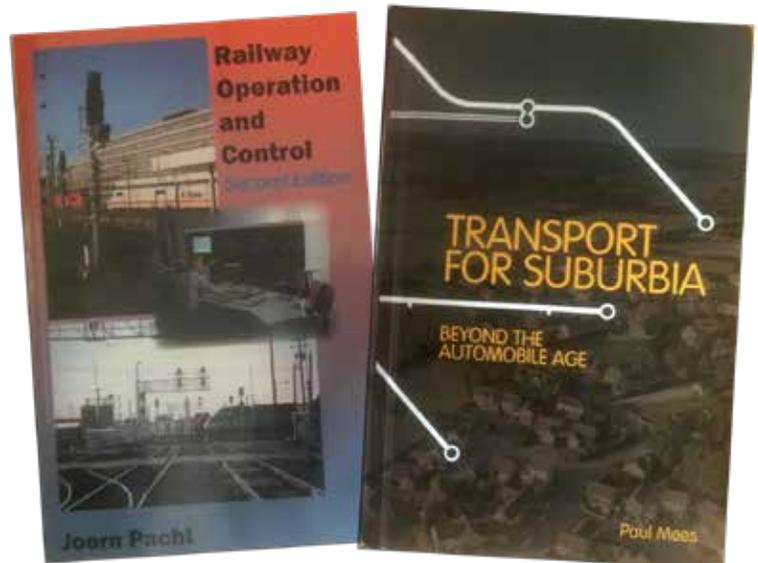
A solution?

Perhaps its time for something radical. The worst bottleneck is in Los Angeles County. LACMTA has been notorious for foot dragging when it comes to main line track improvements. While LAUS through tracks and double tracking in the San Fernando Valley remain on the drawing board, construction continues apace on adding lanes to Interstate 5 both north and south of downtown. How does Metrolink compete against 12 or more lanes of freeway receiving multiple billions in subsidies? Roads are built, the rail alternative is talked about and studied. How about proposing something radical. Let's take two lanes from the center of Interstate 10 and making the railroad a proper, double track line? The freeway traffic would still flow for at least twenty of the twenty four hours, and with up to thirty minutes taken out of the Metrolink schedule and twice as many trains we would see a radical modal shift. Add to that some congestion pricing and parking restrictions and maybe, just maybe, we'll begin to have a useful regional rail system. Four and a half hours from Burbank to San

Bernardino just doesn't cut the mustard.

Paul Dyson is the former President of RailPAC and recently celebrated 51 years working in the railroad industry.

Reading for a rail journey - Transport for Suburbia by Paul Mees was recommended by Chad Edison, Deputy Secretary for Rail at CalSTA, for which I am extremely grateful. I highly recommend this for an serious rail advocate. Railway Operation and Control by Joern Pachel is a technical work for professional railroaders. The translation from German is not the best, but it's a must read if you are into operations.



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