

STEEL WHEELS

PASSENGER RAIL IN CALIFORNIA AND THE WEST

ISSN 2325-629X

MAGAZINE OF THE WESTERN PASSENGER TRAIN COALITION

RAILPAC • ALL ABOARD ARIZONA • PASSENGER RAIL KANSAS • NEW MEXICO RA • MINNARP
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**Long Distance Train of the Future?
An abbreviated Capitol Limited heads west
through Washington Grove MD January 5, 2023.
Credit: Steven J Walter**

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1st QUARTER 2023

PUBLICATION OF THE



RAIL PASSENGER ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA & NEVADA

From the Editor's Desk

By Paul Dyson - RailPAC Editor



I am coming to the conclusion that Brightline is our last, best hope for passenger rail. First they have the correct philosophy; the only way to run a reliable commercial passenger service in the USA is to have your own track. Of course much of the Florida route is shared with Florida East Coast freight trains, but sufficient money has been invested to ensure that both operations can run efficiently without interference. Secondly,

they worked closely with Siemens, including having their own QC inspector at the factory, to make sure that their trains run right out of the box. Thirdly, they control the whole product from the time you purchase your ticket, enter the station, and leave the station at your destination.

One can argue of course that the south Florida market is the low hanging fruit of the business. If you can't make it there, it won't work anywhere else. But there are other places where the initial investment might be lower, indeed has already been made, where the Brightline formula could be applied. I would like to imagine a scenario whereby Brightline took over both the Northeast ("NEC") and the Southwest ("LOSSAN") corridors and brought their level of service to the largest population centers in the country. It's not beyond the bounds of possibility. On both railroads passenger trains predominate, although there are areas where investment is sorely needed (Los Angeles – Fullerton) to insulate passenger trains from congested freight yards and their approaches. Ownership of the NEC should be

transferred to a regional government consortium with the intercity passenger service having clearly defined priorities and schedule slots. Ideally the California Coast line should be purchased from Union Pacific, and voila, you have the makings of two modern passenger railroads.

Brightline has already invested \$4 billion in south Florida. Will it be the equivalent of the Channel Tunnel and become, as the Economist newspaper opined many years ago, "a gift from the investor to future generations"? \$4 billion plus interest is a big nut to crack with \$50 tickets, especially after a shaky start thanks to Covid. But with the extension to Orlando set to open this year and tourist traffic returning to Florida in ever greater numbers the opportunity is there to move large numbers of passengers and turn Brightline into a success story.

Brightline, our best hope?



That leaves open the question of Las Vegas and southern California. If you were Brightline management or investors would you want to see how Florida works out before opening your checkbook to build a new railroad here in the southwest? I would think so. But assuming I had the resources I would want to advance planning and early engineering to make it "shovel ready" in the event that the business case looks strong enough.

I have always felt that the biggest market for Brightline West is overseas tourists transiting between Las Vegas and southern California. I read recently that there are now 12 daily flights between Los Angeles and London, and dozens more from other parts of the world. Las Vegas also has many direct overseas flights, representing thousands of potential passengers for Brightline I am optimistic that the business will be there, and that the project will go ahead.

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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



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



What Price Resiliency?

For the last forty years the overriding focus of business has been on efficiency; how to deliver a product at the lowest cost to the consumer.

In many ways this singular focus has been driven by enhanced national and global competition and economic changes. It has also been accentuated by the efforts of middle income consumers to maintain their standard of living in an era of stagnant or declining wages. Manufacturing and service companies (companies that actually produce goods and services) have also been pressed to increase their rates of return in order to compete with the high returns of complex financial schemes that leverage gyrations in the financial markets. As companies have relentlessly streamlined operations to cut costs, one thing that has fallen by the wayside is resiliency. Why invest in an activity that may only be used once a year or once a decade? There is no quarterly payoff from that investment.

In railroading the only projects undertaken are those that yield a higher rate of return than the stock price increase from a stock buyback. Two more examples; track maintenance forces are no longer spread along the rail line to help clear snow. Instead these forces are in large system wide units who work on the south in the winter and north in the summer. Very efficient but who clears the snow? The railroads have also pared their crew bases to the minimum and below with low-priority trains parked on the mainline waiting for a rested crew. The train is on the mainline because lengthening yard tracks for a twice a week occurrence did not cross the internal ROI threshold. And by the way, the Sunset Ltd. is behind the freight train. It is interesting that despite all the issues around rail service the past few months financial results for the rail industry during the fourth quarter of 2022 were robust.

Southwest Airlines meltdown over the holidays was a manifestation of this same phenomenon, a total focus on efficiency over resiliency. Southwest's point-to-point network is efficient but very complex and yet they tried to manage their network with an older system that should have been replaced two decades ago. The system crashed and the result was chaos.

Given that the Coast Starlight and Pacific Surfliner did not operate for several weeks should we concentrate less on route expansion and more on the service resiliency of the current network? There are many route segments subject to potential flooding, landslides, lake effect snow, etc. Should the resiliency of Amtrak's existing routes be a priority for Infrastructure, Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funding over new routes?

President's Commentary

By Steve Roberts – RailPAC President

New Long-Distance Equipment.

Amtrak has begun the process of ordering new long-distance equipment. The process is very deliberative for several reasons. First, this is a "bet on the long-distance trains" transaction so the equipment has to perform for forty years. There is no room for SDP-40F's, E-60's, United Aircraft Turbo trains, HHP-8, and other "hanger queens". Given that every other previous builder of long-distance equipment has had financial problems, the initial phase of this effort is as much convincing equipment manufacturers to "bet their car building business" on an Amtrak custom long-distance order as it is Amtrak discussing with the manufacturers about what they can deliver. Amtrak does not want to pay a "bankruptcy premium" for these new cars.

As I noted in my article "Bi-level Challenge" (Fourth Quarter 2021 Steel Wheels, page 8) an order for one car type (single-level or bi-level) is required to yield the largest car order possible. One challenge is that DOT and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) will likely only sign-off for a one-for-one car replacement (Superliner, Viewliner and Amfleet II) as part of a base order - about 650 bi-level cars or 900 single level cars. Any expansion of the fleet beyond that would be in an option add-on to the base order. A recent positive announcement has Via Rail joining Amtrak in this effort. This adds the equivalent of about 125 single-level cars. The result is a total base car order of about 750 bi-level cars or 1,025 single level cars.

Another challenge in the process is the need to identify and create a whole new supply chain of parts unique to a long distance car. The new cars must comply with new safety/crash worthiness and ADA requirements. While both Amtrak and the manufacturers have been developing solutions, any potentially differing solution must now be reconciled. New technology and replacements for legacy technology that is no longer available must be integrated into the car design. Adding to the complexity, designs for types of accommodations and cost effective service delivery that appeals to the current marketplace, must be determined and designed (Fourth Quarter 2022 Steel Wheels page 12, "A Look at Future Long-Distance Accommodations and On-Board Service Packages").

One impact of a new long-distance car order is that it dramatically lowers the cut-off for rebuilding a wreck damaged long-distance car. Spending \$2 million to repair a damaged Superliner I coach when new cars are being developed is a non-starter. Only the backlog of cars needing the required air brake overhaul and cars with minor cosmetic damage or missing parts will be repaired. All the remainder of the stored cars at Beech Grove will become "parts cars" to keep the remainder of the fleet in service.

The Federal Railroad Administration contractor has begun the stakeholder outreach meetings for the Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study. Meetings are scheduled first on the east coast then moving west. Advocates should go to the FRA's Long-Distance Service Study and provide your name and email for outreach for the study.

Having worked with the study contractor (AECOM), I am confident about the analytics of the study and its findings. What I have less confidence in is that any study findings will be implemented. It should be noted that the original goal of advocates was a focused effort through the Infrastructure Bill for a daily Cardinal and Sunset Ltd. But everyone wanted "their" route so instead of direct action on two key routes, Congress opted for a "study". There is an old Washington saying "Studies are where ideas go to die". My guess is that the study will show a handful of routes for further action, while most routes studied will fail to make the cut due to a combination of modest ridership and ticket revenues combined with high start-up capital expenses for track and capacity improvements. Also the FRA and OMB of whatever Administration is in office in 2025 will have to approve any new Amtrak routes.

Tough choices, will advocates rally around key investments (for resiliency, a few selected new routes, etc.) with the best outcomes or will advocates double down and demand "their" favorite route?

“It’s Time To Relocate The Surf Line Railroad Track Inland, and Build The San Clemente Bypass Tunnel”

By Brian Yanity Vice President, South, RailPAC

It is of critical importance to address the land slippage and erosion threatening rail service on the coastal railroad section in San Clemente. Train service through southern Orange County has been temporarily suspended because of the instability of the land beneath the tracks. This is a transportation emergency that must be taken seriously by local, state and federal stakeholders, both in the near- and long-term. The cost of past inaction is catching up to us now.

The “Surf Line” is both a key regional and intercity rail route boasting the 2nd highest intercity ridership in the nation. For 130 years the Surf Line has provided travelers between Los Angeles and San Diego a convenient and efficient alternative to the automobile. Passenger rail is also the most environmentally friendly way to move large numbers of people rapidly between the nation’s 2nd and 8th largest cities. Per passenger-mile travelled, the greenhouse gas emissions of riding even a diesel-powered train is only a fraction of that going by car. It is also a vital freight route that supports the regional and national economy and reduces truck traffic on parallel I-5, further reducing pollution and wear and tear on the roads. Because it is the only direct rail link connecting the principal mainland port of the U.S. Navy Pacific Fleet and Camp Pendleton to the rest of the nation, it has been designated part of the U.S. military’s Strategic Rail Corridor Network. But until repairs are completed, the San Diego-Tijuana bi-national metro area (population 5 million) will lack a railroad connection with the rest of North America.

The first priority is to stabilize and maintain the existing Surf Line tracks through San Clemente to be an operable railroad for as long as geologic conditions allow. The Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA), as steward of this vital regional, state and national asset, has begun this project to restore train service as before. It is expected to take until March at the earliest before Amtrak and Metrolink can resume full service along this section.

But concurrently, planning must proceed to relocate the tracks inland. No amount of reinforcement of the bluffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean will prevent the inevitable loss of the tracks. After all, this particular stretch of coastline has been naturally eroding eastward for thousands of years. Human-induced climate change and rising sea levels, along with sediment flows into the ocean reduced by flood control infrastructure and other factors, are accelerating these natural processes. What is required is to develop a new alignment away from the shoreline, most likely via a bypass tunnel underneath I-5.

The San Clemente bypass megaproject will take years to plan and build so OCTA and Caltrans should begin preparing for it without delay, starting with environmental studies and preliminary designs. The bypass tunnel should be electrified and designed to accommodate increased train capacity and reduced travel time, so as to stimulate more non-highway travel between Los Angeles and San Diego, support regional economic growth, and aid military preparedness.

Both programs - stabilizing the existing tracks and planning the bypass - will need funding through state and federal grants.

OCTA should aggressively pursue financing for both projects now since the current window of opportunity for funding must be leveraged before it closes. Competition for funding grants is based on the value of the project: its projected ridership. A passenger rail project’s ridership forecast starts with the existing ridership as a baseline. If current ridership numbers are low because of service issues, a lower future ridership will be projected. This could create a financing shortfall for the planning, design, and construction phases.

To maximize available funding for the rail bypass, strategic planning and investment will be needed to generate high ridership numbers on the existing Surf Line once full service is restored. Bringing passengers back in force means establishing promotional programs, convenient scheduling, and high standards of service excellence and reliability. For California and the nation it is vital that the railroad linking Los Angeles and San Diego be secure and endure for future generations.

[an earlier version of this piece was published in [Voice of OC on December 19, 2022](#)]

Brian Yanity, of Fullerton, is the Vice President-South of the Rail Passenger Association of California (RailPAC), a 501(c)3 all-volunteer non-profit passenger rail advocacy group founded in 1978.

Google Earth perspective of alignment for potential relocation of LOSSAN rail line:



a bypass tunnel underneath the I-5 right-of-way (ROW) from San Juan Capistrano to San Onofre.

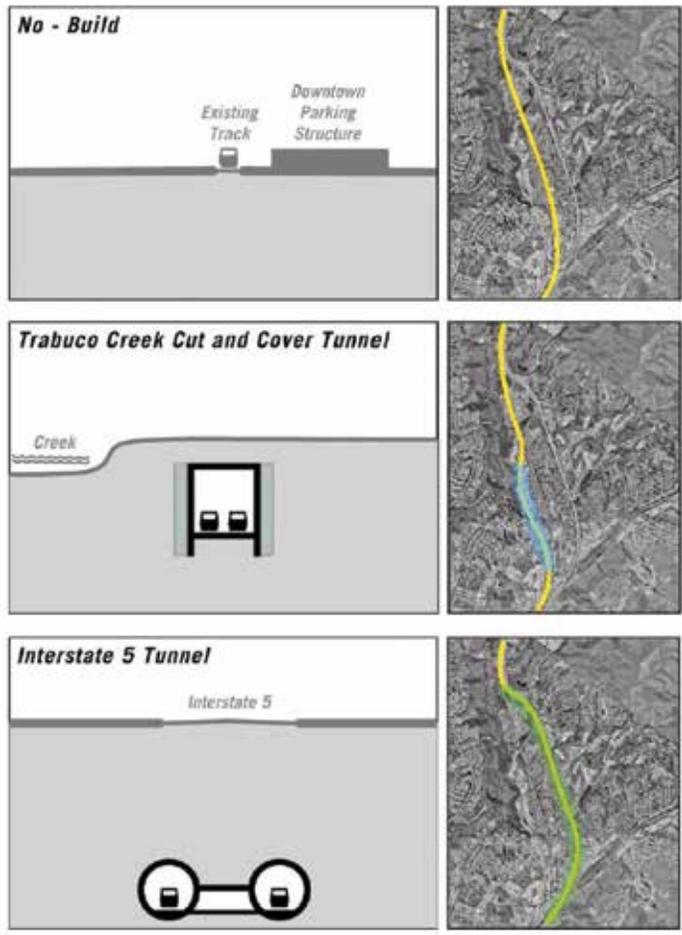
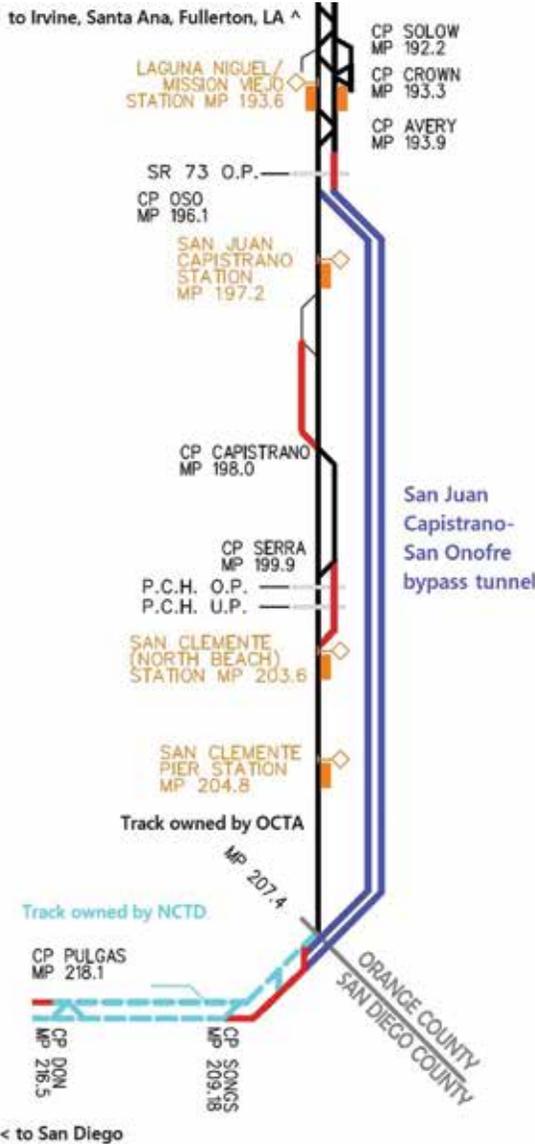


Figure 6-11 – Options Retained for Further Consideration in San Juan Capistrano



RailPAC

RAIL PASSENGER ASSOCIATION
of CALIFORNIA and NEVADA

May 20, 2023

**at the California State
Railroad Museum Sacramento**

Register at railpacspring2023.eventbrite.com

Check www.railpac.org
for speaker updates and meeting details.



Trip Report: Florida to Minnesota by Train

by Andrew Selden Photos by the author unless credited.

We decided to visit friends in Florida for New Year's Eve. We flew down (like normal people do), arriving in Ft. Lauderdale on an uneventful 3 ½ hour nonstop on Delta. But to extend the trip, we also decided—after a long discussion of the risks—to come home by train. We used No. 98, the *Silver Meteor*, from West Palm Beach to Washington, DC; No. 29, the *Capitol Limited*, to Chicago; and No. 27, the Portland Section of the *Empire Builder* to St. Paul. Fortunately for us, the *Empire Builder* operated the day we were scheduled to ride it. One can't take that for granted this winter, as Amtrak can't seem to run it in normal winter weather and annuls trips on short or no notice.

This is another trip that Amtrak CEO Stephen Gardner doesn't know exists, as it involves three trains over two nights and three days, covering about 2300 miles.



Silver Meteor stops at preserved Palatka FL depot.
Photo: Bob Pickering

Day One: The Silver Meteor

We began with an Uber to the West Palm Beach station. Road signs point to the "Tri-Rail" commuter station, which also houses Greyhound and Amtrak, but none mentions "Amtrak." On the platform, no signage confirms that Amtrak even stops here, and if so, on which track. I set off hoping to find an agent, and, beyond the Greyhound office along the iconic south Florida rail platform, I encounter two most cheerful Amtrak employees, the agent and the baggage guy, who offers unprompted to check my bags, and explains where to stand to wait for the sleepers on #98.

The *Silver* trains still carry their sleepers on the rear, where they belong. Amtrak torments its sleeper passengers on western trains by putting sleepers up front, adjacent to the engines and all their noise and fumes.

It's a 60 degree, sunny, breezy morning, complete with palm trees. While we wait, three Tri-Rail trains call at WPB, and a Greyhound bus leaves for points north. Brightline trains call at a different station, on the Florida East Coast railroad a mile east. Soon, No. 98 appears, a minute early: two familiar P-42 engines, a baggage car, three Amfleet II coaches, an Amfleet

dinette/lounge car, a Viewliner II diner, and three Viewliner sleepers (two new Viewliner IIs sandwiching our Viewliner I, #69011).

A cheerful, chatty car attendant hops down, greets us by name, helps get our bags up into the car, and welcomes us aboard. It's approaching 10 AM, but to my amazement she reports that the diner is open and still serving breakfast, so we scoot up to sample "Flexible Dining." This is airline food, and not in a good way. It's really hard to divine what Amtrak thinks is good about this food. It's what *you* would offer if you were trying to discourage repeat business. We decide on the spot to have breakfast tomorrow at a real restaurant in Washington.

Later, sitting in our Bedroom (A) watching orange groves fly by, we observe that the windows aren't as clean as they should be, as we fly down the bumpy CSX tracks at 79. Our car lady takes our lunch and dinner orders (so the one guy in the diner can pre-heat them), and asks if we prefer to take them in our room or in the diner. We opt for the diner. We find later that most sleeper customers opt for their rooms.

At 10:40 we meet a CSX southbound, and at 10:50 glimpse a local switching a large building center. We are on time at Winter Haven. At about 12:10 at MP 820, we take a right turn at the junction at Auburndale where the *Silver Star* goes west to Tampa, and we go northeast to Orlando. Near Kissimmee, we pass a small Sunrail yard (the Orlando area regional rail service), and shortly we see several Sunrail trains.

No one rides the *Silver Meteor* for the scenery, or the "experience." The scenery consists of orange groves, farther north the "tunnel of trees" where southern forests crowd in on the railroad, and in the far north, the NEC. And the "experience" is limited to the inherent civility of travel by rail—the food is awful and the level and quality of onboard services reflects the luck of the draw of who your car attendant might be. Ours is excellent, but some are better than others.

At Orlando, we venture one car forward to the diner for lunch. It is not a happy event. The car, with its complete galley all but unused, and staffed by a single employee, is almost deserted. Built with 48 seats in 12 booths, it now seats only 38, with one booth taken over for stores and one and a half removed altogether to afford wheelchair access to a table, but really used only for three self-service trash boxes. We stand by the galley entrance and announce what we pre-ordered. The LSA hands us a box, which we supplement with paper napkins and condiments, and sit at an open booth.

The food is almost inedible. My wife observes, "This is really unpleasant." It is served in a paper box, with the entrée in a round plastic dish with a cardboard cover, and a roll and tiny green salad separately wrapped. It produces more trash than food. The exact same menu appears for dinner.

At 4:45, in a typhoon rainstorm, we stop south of Jacksonville. Eventually, the conductor announces that we are stopped due to a tornado warning in the area. It is dark as night. A half hour later, as the skies begin to lighten, we get underway again.

The “Flexible Dining” dinner is worse than the lunch, and is not helped by the free glass of bland wine served with a pour-it-yourself plastic wine glass.

We go to bed early somewhere in South Carolina, with the train about 45 minutes late. Overnight, the CSX main gets worse, with long patches of corrugated rail, bad surfacing and very rough turnouts. But we are spared the noise of the engines, and the horn.

At 7:22, we stop at Washington Union Station, more or less on time. We hurry off the train. After changing to electric engines, the train is free to leave as soon as possible because this and all points north are “discharge only” stops.

The concrete platform is breaking up and very uneven. A dozen or so Amtrak employees are slouching around on the platform; what they are supposed to be doing is not obvious. Inside, the once bustling WUS is almost deserted. The restaurants and many of the shops are gone. We drop our bags in the equally deserted Acela lounge, and head off to the Dubliner, the restaurant in the nearby Phoenix Park hotel, for a welcome real breakfast of actual cooked food.



Cover picture, *Capitol Limited* Photo: Steven J Walter

Day Two: The *Capitol Limited*

After a day visiting with friends, we are back in the Acela lounge at 3:00 to await departure of the *Capitol Limited*. We decline the offer of Redcap service, even though we know that is a thinly-disguised way to get really early boarding at Eastern stations, for a modest tip to the Redcaps. The lounge has been refurbished and the seats are comfy, but the snack and beverage offerings are very basic. The lounge, like the station, is nearly deserted. Only five passengers are there at 3:05 PM, and it turns out all of them are on our train, #29, due out at 4:05.

Around 3:20, an usher and a Redcap begin to collect people for the *Capitol's* sleepers. After they have gathered everyone else, the usher comes to us and says, “C’mon you two—I’ll give you a ride.” OK—no sense fighting it. He puts us and our bags on a cart right outside the west door, and off we go—about a 10-second ride to the platform for #29, and the familiar red marker lights of a Superliner coach.

I about choke when I get a look at the mighty *Capitol Limited*: it consists in its entirety of one P-42, one baggage car, ONE sleeper, a wretched Superliner Cross-Country café (converted from a real dining car), and ONE coach.

Two revenue cars—is this a joke? Can there be any doubt that management is sabotaging these trains?

We have more than a hundred passengers stuffed into those two cars, according to the conductor. How many more couldn’t get seats or rooms?



No one wants the food.

The one food service car in the train epitomizes Amtrak’s misunderstanding of its own customers and its own services. The car is a “Cross-Country Café”—one of a handful of 72-seat Superliner dining cars converted to a combo diner-and-lounge car configuration, but used mainly as a device to minimize on

board labor cost and passenger services. The car as operated has ten booths with 40 seats in the dining end, and four booths and 16 seats at the lounge end. A combined center snack bar faces the lounge end, and a serving station embracing the stairs and



Here’s why. Plastic dining on the Capitol Limited.

dumb-waiters from the galley faces the dining end. Some of these cars are assigned only a single employee.

The car on the *Capitol Limited* is further reduced to just seven booths and 28 dining seats and zero booths and zero seats in the lounge end by employees using the space, and one booth used as a stores depot for paper napkins and ketchup packets. The lounge end booths all have straps across them saying “No seating allowed.”

Amtrak’s disdain for its passengers is best exemplified by the scripted all-train PA announcement repeated three or four times during the trip: “The lounge car is for on-site eating only. There is to be absolutely no hanging out or lounging about in the lounge car.” At no time over the entire trip do either lounge car employees make any announcement promoting the purchase of food and beverages from the café, or mentioning the hours of service.

On the other hand, no restriction is applied to coach passengers who might want to consume their airport-grade snack food “meals” at a dining booth. Sleeping car passengers are encouraged to take their “free” Flexible Dining “meals” in their rooms, but are also free to use a booth in the café car. It is the only place on the Amtrak system where coach and sleeping car passengers might find themselves eating meals in each other’s company.

The booths are all bare formica with no adornment of any kind. Passengers are expected to fetch their own paper napkins and condiments, and bus their own copious piles of trash, and most do. Others do not.

The two crew working in this car are friendly and helpful, but can only do so much. They make no effort to accost a few passengers who beat the system by buying a beverage and a bag of peanuts and nursing them along for an hour or more to allow enjoyment of the peaceful environment and sightseeing opportunities that the car affords. Sightseeing in the historically-significant and extremely scenic Potomac River Valley, however, is truncated by darkness on this January day—an hour out, at Harper’s Ferry, darkness overtakes us.

Dinner is the same inedible glop as on the *Silver Meteor*. I will wager that neither Stephen Gardner nor Board Chair Anthony Coscia has ever ridden this train or suffered eating these “meals.”

All our evening station stops are early and we wait for time at each. Apparently, we “own the railroad” as no freight trains pass us. Overnight, the track is much better and we sleep soundly to west of Toledo. At breakfast, we try the continental version: no fruit is available, but we get packaged oatmeal, yogurt and a dry muffin, all on a par with a cheap budget motel on the highway. It too produces the now-familiar pile of waste packaging.

We make a mystery stop where the line to Detroit converges, but no other train is visible, and freight traffic on the usually busy NS main line is very thin. I take advantage of the

Holiday Scene at Chicago Union Station



shower in the bedroom, always an adventure on a moving train, but well worth the effort. We arrive Chicago about 25 minutes early. Bruce, our car attendant, carries (unbidden) all our bags out to the platform, and earns a good tip and our

thanks.

Chicago is cold, damp and windy, so we cancel our planned walk through downtown in favor of reading in the spacious and nicely furnished Metropolitan Lounge, which is nearly deserted at this early hour. The lounge lady is the first and only Amtrak employee on the entire trip to ask to see our “ticket”—the QR code on our self-printed boarding pass. Conductors all seem to rely on their printed manifests for sleeper passengers. Beverages and snacks are less than basic (there’s no hot water, thus no tea), but after noon a pay-as-you-go wine kiosk opens.

We do walk into the Loop for lunch at a real restaurant. Real food is a most welcome relief from “Flexible Dining.” The *next* time we ride any train with “Flexible Dining,” we WILL figure out a way to cater a high-quality picnic dinner to carry onto the train ourselves. The lounge car guy on the *Capitol Limited* promised “more fresh stuff and more variety” was coming, but also said they had to drop bananas because of fruit flies in the commissaries. (How do grocery distributors manage? Why not contract with them?)



Empire Builder at Milwaukee Intermodal Station

Photo: Steven J Walter

Day Three: The Empire Builder

At 2:30 they call boarding for the *Empire Builder*, still Amtrak’s best train, due out at 3:05. There are no ushers or guides (passengers for the *California Zephyr* and *Southwest Chief* get escorts, even though the gates are basically around the corner from the lounge), and the lounge lady barks at passengers where to stand, and then where to go to find the *Empire Builder’s* North-side gate. If you didn’t already know where it was, it would be a challenge to find. But when we get to track 17, the train is spotted but the crew isn’t ready to board anyone, so we stand there for nearly 15 minutes. Our car is the one Portland sleeper, last car on the train, hence the closest to the gate. Unlike the pathetic *Capitol Limited*, this feels like a real train, with three locomotives (two new but cold-challenged ALC-42s), baggage car, crew dorm, one Seattle sleeper, diner, one Seattle coach, Sightseer lounge, two Portland coaches and the one Portland sleeper. We get the short walk at Chicago, offset by a very long, cold walk at St. Paul.

Half way to Milwaukee and about 40 minutes out from Chicago, the lounge guy graces us by opening the café for service. We enjoy a glass of blah wine through Milwaukee. Darkness falls near Columbus as we head to the diner for a 6:00 PM dinner seating. No more than a dozen people show up, but we see several bags of “take out” meals being taken away by crew for meals being delivered to sleeper rooms.

This is the restored Traditional Dining, as close as Amtrak gets to a decent meal. Tables are covered in institutional-grade but attractive white linens with navy blue cloth napkins and real stainless cutlery. A beautiful bouquet of fresh flowers is at each table. Our “one free wine with dinner” comes in an actual glass drinking glass (but the water arrives in plastic cups, and the food is served on Amtrak’s inexhaustible supply of plastic picnic plates). The Traditional Dining food is not cooked on board but still is actually pretty good, something that is a profound change from the last two days of airplane “food”. The dinner menu offers a steak, salmon, chicken and rigatoni, plus a starter and a dessert. They will add a small salad, but only if you remember to ask for one.

We get into a conversation with the very accommodating LSA about why the menu fails to note whether any items are, or can be made, gluten free, a serious health challenge for many. She understands the problem, but has no answer. At that very moment, up from the galley appears a fellow wearing a chef’s tunic with “Chef Randy” stitched on the front. Who knew? The LSA says, “I’ll ask our chef,” and Randy comes over to our table and we have a long and most interesting chat about Amtrak’s foodservice program. But no answer on gluten, and Randy says he doesn’t even have reliable ingredient labels to help him. He retreats to the other end of the car, where we see him on his cellphone for several minutes. He then returns to our table to report that he has just discussed the issue with Amtrak’s corporate chef in Delaware, and that they think with the next menu revision in the spring they may be able to designate some meals as “gluten friendly.” This is progress. Maybe later they can look to see where the promised real china is hidden.

We ask the LSA when coach passengers will be allowed to buy meals in the diner. The answer is that they can just barely staff the diners to feed the sleeping car passengers and would be swamped with even a few coach diners. Hmmm... But they add that there is only one Seattle sleeper and one Seattle coach for the same reason: insufficient staffing. That doesn’t explain the solo coach, because Amtrak routinely makes one coach attendant responsible for two cars.

Our sleeper attendant comes by our room several times asking if he can do anything for us. He volunteers that this is his first solo trip as a sleeper attendant. He is a great guy and a credit to Amtrak. We hope he stays with the job for a long time.

We stop unexpectedly just short of the Division Street wye, the busiest rail junction in Minnesota. Despite it being nearly 11 PM and “quiet hours,” the conductor announces that we caught a red signal from a freight train slowly clearing the junction. Ten minutes later, we stop at St. Paul, about 12 minutes late.

The trip has come to a successful and satisfying conclusion, with the one major exception of Amtrak’s sorry “Flexible Dining” fiasco, which seems calculated to drive people away, to deter repeat business. Otherwise, almost all the employees we encountered were warm, helpful and upbeat, the two station lounges were comfortable (if a bit Spartan in the refreshments offered), and the tone of the entire trip was civilized and relaxing, in sharp contrast to the airports on the trip down. We would cheerfully do it again, but we would figure out how to pack in our own meals on the eastern trains.

The few problems we encountered are easily remedied and easily within management’s span of control (and budget). Windows can be washed more thoroughly, the lounges upgraded one notch, and the on board food universally upgraded to the restored Traditional Dining that is being well-implemented and well-received on most western trains. The inter-regional trains as a group contribute (when Amtrak can be bothered to run full consists) \$400 million or more in annual positive free cash flow; Amtrak can and should put a bit of that back into its foodservice.



Circumstances prevented Board member Don Bing and I from doing our reconnaissance of the Metrolink Arrow service this past week so we are holding that over until the second quarter. As a teaser, RailPAC VP Brian Yanity visited the line and took some photos of western San Bernardino County at its snowcapped best. Here Arrow Stadler unit 3402 is waiting to depart Redlands University station for San Bernardino.



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South Bay Connect – A Project of Capitol Corridor JPA

RailPAC has long been concerned that the Capitol Corridor service will not reach its full potential without increased frequency and significant reduction in journey time between Oakland and San Jose. The planned project reroutes trains between Oakland and Newark to connect with a new intermodal station that links to the Dumbarton transit service. This reroute would decrease travel time between Oakland and Santa Clara by approximately 15 minutes and reduce traffic congestion by providing critical service to new markets along I-880, including Silicon Valley.

South Bay Connect proposes to relocate the Capitol Corridor passenger rail service between the Oakland Coliseum and Newark from the Union Pacific Railroad (UP) Niles Subdivision to the Coast Subdivision for a faster, more direct route.

level in the next few years. The project is very much dependent on a close partnership with UPRR, with whom CCJPA has a very good relationship, and I'm optimistic about the prospects of the project once specific railroad improvements have been identified. South Bay Connect is the first step toward CCJPA's vision of increased service frequency between Oakland and San Jose, so we're very committed to moving this project forward."

A key RailPAC activity is providing supporting letters to agencies such as CCJPA for their grant applications to the State and Federal transportation agencies. We will revisit this topic as plans progress.

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-  Proposed New Station and Potential Station Area
-  Potential Station Considered and Eliminated
-  Existing Station
-  Station where CC Service to be Discontinued

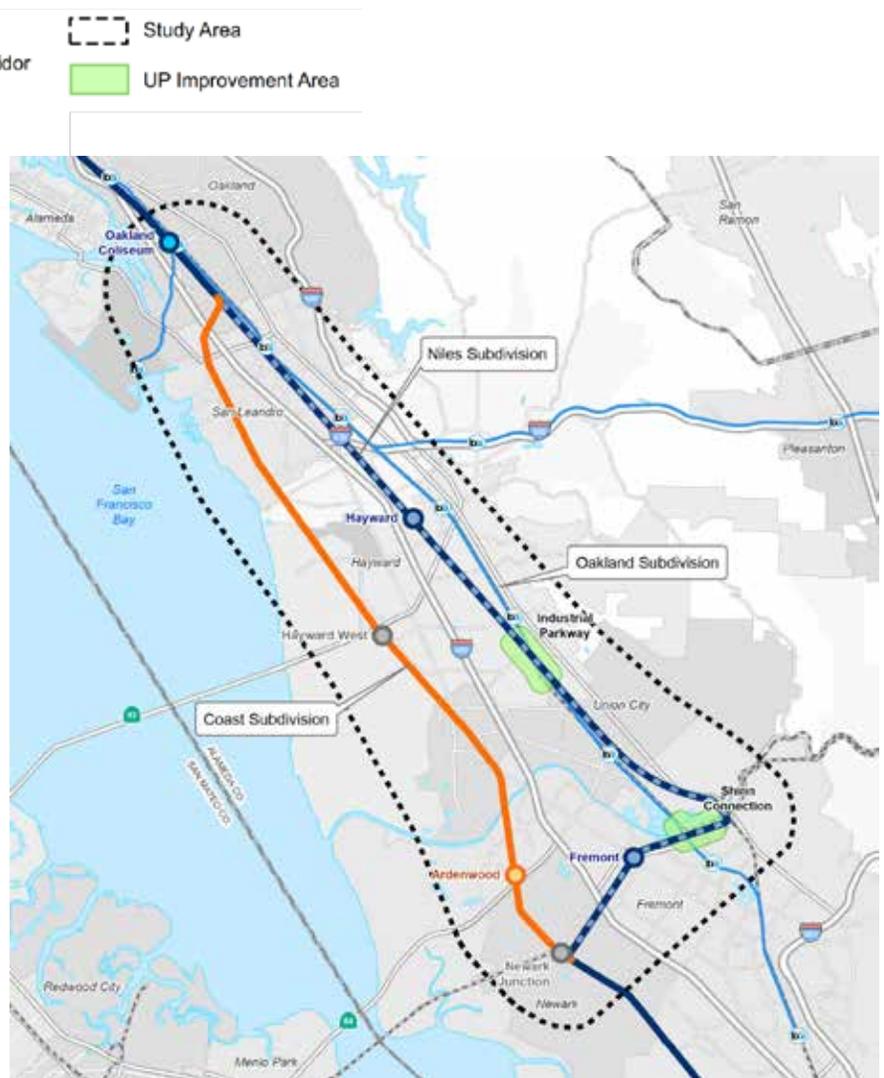
-  Railroad
-  Proposed Capitol Corridor (CC) Service
-  Existing CC Service
-  CC Service to be Discontinued
-  Study Area
-  UP Improvement Area

It will also create new Transbay connections for passengers between the East Bay and Peninsula by connecting to bus and shuttle services at the Ardenwood Station.

The relocation will facilitate the separation of passenger and freight rail, resulting in improved rail operations, efficiency, and reliability while minimizing rail congestion within the corridor.

The population of San Jose at a little over a million is about as large as Oakland and Sacramento combined, and so it should be a significant traffic generator.

Steel Wheels asked Capitol Corridor for an update on the project. Program Manager Shirly Qian responded: "The South Bay Connect project is currently in preliminary design and environmental documentation phase. We are working closely with Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) to determine specific railroad improvements needed for the project to benefit both passenger and freight railroad, while preparing for releasing a draft Environmental Impact Report for public review by the end of 2023. The project has \$183.1 million of committed grant funding from local, regional, and state sources, and CCJPA plans to seek additional funding for construction at the state and federal



HAVE YOU SEEN THEM ON YOUR AMTRAK TRAIN?

Photo Commentary by Russ Jackson



Riders! If you have seen either of these gentlemen on your train or on a platform anywhere CONGRATULATIONS!

Just who are they? Let me introduce them. I doubt you've ever seen them. They should be out there to meet you. On the left is the Amtrak Chairman of the Board Anthony Coscia. On the right is CEO-President Stephen Gardner. Hello gents...glad to see ya! Do you ride? No? You can! You should Ride and React! (Amtrak photos)



Recently an article, "What happened to Southwest Airlines?" was written by a veteran pilot about the "epic meltdown" that happened to his airline in late December 2022. Television pictures of huge mounds of luggage piled up at airports entertained the public, angered the riders, and there was cancellation of thousands of flights. The anonymous author of the article makes his point by saying that "frontline employees have been watching this meltdown coming like a slow-motion train wreck for some time. And we've been begging our leadership to make much needed changes to avoid it." Rail advocates can appreciate the reference to trains there. Delete "Southwest" and substitute "Amtrak."



Southwest misses their founder, Herb Kelleher (left). Amtrak misses its best President, W. Graham Claytor (right) who were "hands-on" managers and highly respected by workers and customers because they knew them. (Southwest, Amtrak photos)



Years of neglect at Amtrak's highest levels by executives who don't Ride and React has led the railroad to what it is today, in a state of disarray and decay. There are good loyal train employees who are struggling to do what the Southwest Airlines pilot said, "give our heart and soul to our jobs." The riders keep on coming because they want to. "Up there" in Amtrak DC management what do they do? Work with "statistics," not "customers." An example of the correctable mistakes is the prolonged "Flexible" dining on Eastern trains and the *Texas Eagle*. One rider in Chicago Union Station said, "Amtrak food is horrible" as she bought fast-food meals to carry-on. That must change.

Mr. Coscia and Mr. Gardner: RIDE and then REACT. Get out of the office! Take frequent trips on one of your Superliner trains! Even ride the NEC! Ride in your passenger cars! Dine in your on-board dining cars not in a private car! Show the employees who you are! Show the customers that you are interested! Be the faces of Amtrak! Your successful predecessors W. Graham Claytor did, David Gunn did. Out west Gil Mallery and Gene Skoropowski did. You should. You can!

There is progress in the air in Arizona and we are in the best position we have been for many years to improve passenger rail in the Copper State. Now is the time for a full court press on policy makers to move rail forward. I'll start with describing the landscape, what All Aboard Arizona has been doing, and finally, how we can take this favorable environment and translate it into action.

The big news in Arizona is that there is a new Governor in Phoenix. Whatever the merits or detriments of Governor Doug Ducey, he was never going to be supportive of rail. On the other hand, Governor Katie Hobbs has every reason to support passenger rail. Both of the mayors of Arizona's two largest cities, Phoenix and Tucson, are extremely supportive of passenger rail as are almost all the cities along the route of the Sun Corridor. Those are a large percentage of Arizona's voters and the voters who carried her over the top to victory. With money available in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, development of the Sun Corridor is a no brainer.

With the optimism that followed the election, it was a great time to have our Annual Passenger Rail Summit in Tucson in December. We had an excellent line up of speakers and it was a great opportunity to get together with advocates and experts from all over. Our presenters were wide ranging and diverse. We were pleased to have Rob Eaton, Amtrak's Senior Director of Government Affairs-National/State Relations. Rob iterated that the Sun Corridor is an extremely high priority for Amtrak. Jim Matthews from Rail Passengers Association described a landscape of challenges and opportunities. It will take constant action to take advantage of the programs and move Arizona to the front of the list for projects. George Chilson spoke about the efforts of the Aurora Group, Brian Yanity did two presentations, one on the Wellton Line and the other on hydrogen power for rail. Tom White, an expert on rail operations, presented on alternative models of access to rail and the need for modal shift for freight and passenger to rail. The Summit was a great place for advocates to regroup, engage and formulate ideas.

It is important to talk about Amtrak. There is an ugly habit in the advocacy community of bashing Amtrak, and hyper criticism of Amtrak been around for the fifty years that Amtrak has been in existence. Some of it began with nostalgia for the railroad operated passenger service. Some of it is ideological by those who dislike government involvement in rail even though government has been involved in rail since the first steel wheel ever turned in North America and every mode of transportation in America, and universally in the world, is a public-private venture. It is true that former Amtrak management had antipathy for the long-distance trains but that has changed. Amtrak has just announced that they will be procuring new long-distance passenger equipment. Chair Anthony Coscia has extolled the importance of the long-distance trains, and the new Amtrak board appointees have all committed in writing to the national system. There is some indication that the night train

renaissance in Europe is rubbing off on Amtrak management.

Amtrak is legally the only game in town for most corridors and states. That is because Amtrak is a public program under the Rail Passenger Service Act of 1970 and is the only instrumentality that has a statutory right of access to use the private railways. Whatever passenger rail develops in Arizona, it is most likely to be Amtrak that will develop it. Yes, we need to continue to press Amtrak to repair more sidelined cars and improve service. Amtrak is doing a lot of that. It is reported that dining car service will be restored to the eastern trains soon. I have been riding trains my entire life including for the entirety of the Amtrak era. My last two rides were extremely pleasant, and my trip a few months ago on the Southwest Chief was one of the most pleasant rides I've ever had. In fact, Amtrak crews are as courteous, attentive and professional as they have ever been. It is a refreshing change from some of the snarling railroad crews I encountered in the '70s and '80s. Amtrak is doing a lot of things right.

That brings me to Arizona and how we move this effort forward. Regarding the Sun Corridor, All Aboard Arizona plans to work closely with Amtrak, the Sun Corridor communities, and the State to get this program going. We are building relationships with other organizations and building alliances with other groups that have related and compatible interests. In leveraging the relationships we have, and building new ones, we will create enduring alliances and networks that can move the Sun Corridor and passenger rail in Arizona forward.

The Sun Corridor is critical and so is the Sunset Limited. We were extremely pleased that Amtrak took the bull by the horns and filed a complaint with the Surface Transportation Board about the Union Pacific's poor handling of the Sunset. That was an extremely wise decision by Amtrak management and does not appear consistent with the view that Amtrak management wants to get out of the long-distance train business. A Sunset with improved performance is the first step. The essential step is daily service which is essential. We believe that will come. The recent legislation passed in Washington included a mandate that the Federal Railroad Administration study discontinued Amtrak routes and routes that operate less than daily. I am predicting that the result of these efforts will be a daily Sunset Limited, sooner rather than later.

What will we do with a daily Sunset? Plenty! I live in beautiful southeast Arizona. Benson is my closest Amtrak station. We had two attendees at our conference from Douglas who are involved in transportation and want to put Douglas on the Amtrak map, at least with connections. Until 1961, Douglas was a station for the Sunset and the Golden State. It was a railroad town. A new station in Wilcox would be extremely beneficial for Douglas and would also serve the Safford area. Again, All Aboard Arizona will work with transportation advocates and chambers of commerce to work on creating connections to

Amtrak service. Cochise County, like many rural counties, has a bus system. Sierra Vista recently lost Greyhound service and lost scheduled air service years ago. Rail can fill a void.

Some weeks later, I was contacted by another advocate who believes that Wilcox, Arizona would be a great stop for the Sunset. He expressed the view that a Wilcox station would serve the growing number of wineries in and around Wilcox. Wilcox has a charming downtown and many festivals. If the Sunset Limited were daily, it would be possible for travelers from Phoenix to make a day or weekend trip to Wilcox. Connections from Benson could take travelers to Tombstone and Bisbee. One can easily see how momentum could build for Amtrak service and how important it would be to the economies of these communities that are underserved by public transportation. The train stations in Benson and Wilcox

could be hubs of economic activity. Considering these efforts as part of Arizona's comprehensive rail program and an adjunct to the Sun Corridor makes sense. The daily Sunset, especially if rerouted through Phoenix, would serve all southern Arizona. This service would improve the political landscape by increasing the likelihood of political support for rail from communities outside the Sun Corridor. This is an exciting vision and not one that really requires new resources, just reimagined, existing resources.

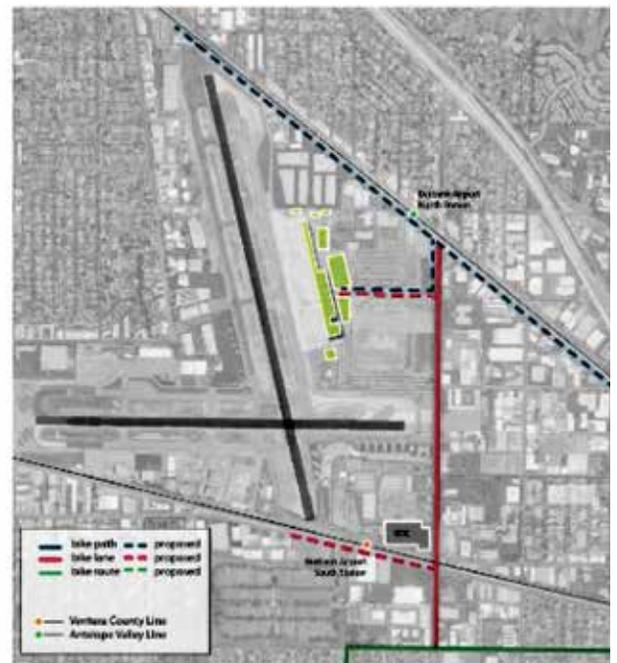
We have come so far, but the exciting work is really just beginning. Contact your legislators and tell them you want rail in your community. If you want to do outreach, join us, and we can help. I have some upcoming Amtrak trips that I am so looking forward to. I hope to see you on the rails soon.

From the Rear Platform: Notes from an Airport Commissioner

By Paul Dyson, Editor

I have been a resident of Burbank, CA since 1992 and served on the Transportation Commission for 16 years. Given that Burbank Airport's Terminal building is situated closer to a mainline station (Burbank Airport South) than I believe anywhere else in the country, and a second station has been built (Burbank Airport North) less than a mile away one would hope that there is at least some amount of use of these facilities by air passengers or airport workers. Alas no. Monthly passenger numbers are barely measurable, a handful per day, and some of those are non-airport users. My objective in applying to become one of the City of Burbank's representatives on the Airport Commission is to try and rectify that and encourage both the Airport and Metrolink and Amtrak to improve service and attract users. The planned replacement terminal makes the job harder, as it moves the terminal away from the south station. More on this in future issues as plans develop.

After three unsuccessful attempts I was finally appointed to an unfinished term last May, and have to reapply in April. The big issue at the Commission is planning and construction of the replacement terminal which is set to start next year. This will result in the destruction of the convenient and adjacent to rail old terminal to be replaced by a new terminal on Hollywood Way roughly midway between the South and North stations. Over the next few months I will be doing my best to make what now looks like an automobile dominated design into a bike, bus and rail transfer friendly true intermodal airport. More to follow.



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From the Rear Platform

By Paul Dyson, Editor



Amtrak Announces start of process to purchase new cars for the Long Distance trains. Call for “expressions of interest” from builders.

Since I have been calling for at least the last decade

for Amtrak to “Build 1,000 railcars” (Steel Wheels March 2013) I should be putting out the flags to celebrate this announcement. Declare victory and go home? Indeed, on its face it’s a step in the right direction. The Superliner fleet is wearing out, and worse, there is no program for anything more than cosmetic treatment, and Amtrak CEO Gardner has admitted that they are stripping repairable cars for spare parts, so the fleet is diminishing all too rapidly. Our cover picture tells the story. Three revenue cars and a baggage car on the Capitol Limited will become all too common.

Herein lies the danger for the national network. It takes a long time from conception to delivery for a new passenger railcar in North America. There’s an interesting exhibit at Los Angeles Union Station about L.A.’s lost street car lines. In it is a brief mention of the PCC car, the standardized north American streetcar that was conceived by a the Presidents’ Conference Committee, who were representatives of the major electric streetcar operators. The committee began it’s work in **1929**; the first cars were delivered in **1936**. In more recent times the voters of California approved proposition B in **2002** to provide funds for additional passenger cars for the state intercity program. The first cars were finally being delivered in **2022** and in fact they are really not the cars we wanted, being designed

for high level platforms. So you see, it is neither a smooth path nor a swift one from deciding to purchase something to taking delivery.

The next issue will surely be cost. Amtrak’s decision to start this process has coincided with a period of inflation that will inevitably lead to “sticker shock” of great magnitude. I anticipate Amtrak tearfully announcing that they can only afford to replace a percentage of the fleet, and given that the new cars are almost certain to be single level, the actual seating and berth capacity will be diminished even further. Dave Randall of the Aurora Group has calculated that to replace the 439 car fleet of Superliners with equivalent seats and sleeping berths would require 536 single level cars. Series long term production of a standard car body should help reduce cost but can Amtrak commit to the funding necessary?

Finally, Amtrak will bump up against the limited production capacity of North American car builders, and given the best will in the world the start date will be out a few years and the production rate will be low. All of these factors together can lead to a perfect storm whereby the national network trains are reduced to short consists, less than daily service, or even route abandonment. RailPAC, and other advocates such as The Aurora Group, can only see one immediate course of action for Amtrak. That is to repair and extend the life of the existing Superliner fleet to tide them over for the next decade. That is how long it will take to build replacements in any quantity. The announcement that the process to replace the Superliners has begun may be good news for the 2030s but is little help for the rest of this decade.

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THE LAST STOP Ed Von Nordeck

RIVERSIDE, CA Few people were more knowledgeable - or more enthusiastic - about passenger rail operations in the United States and Mexico over the last 70 years than RailPAC member Ed Von Nordeck, who died December 6th in California. He was 89.

Ed began learning the basics as a Southern Pacific ticket agent in 1952 at age 19, and following a stint in the U.S. Army Signal Corps, used that hands-on experience to arrange special rail excursions. He also began volunteering at what is today the Southern California Railway Museum (formerly the Orange Empire Railway Museum), beginning a lifelong involvement. He met his wife of 47 years, Mary Lee, while working for the SP. Together they helped out at the museum with fund-raising excursions, and formed Let’s Travel Tours, a company that chartered special trains over many secondary U.S. and Mexico rail routes from 1965 through 2005.

Von Nordeck parlayed his accumulated knowledge into volunteer and paid assignments with LA-area commuter operator Metrolink and the Riverside County Transportation Commission, while also serving as a National Association of Railroad Passengers director.

He received that organization’s Jack R. Martin Passenger Rail Advocacy Award in 2005, but continued keeping an eye on Amtrak. Armed with extensive institutional knowledge from operating special trains and how to efficiently provide quality onboard service, Von Nordeck has been critical of recent food offerings and lounge space cutbacks in emails sent to *Trains News Wire*. He cheered the return of traditional dining to western long-distance trains in 2021, but expressed concern about its continued lack of availability on the *Texas Eagle* and to all coach passengers, as well as the elimination of the *Eagle’s* Sightseer Lounge.

Ed is survived by his wife, Mary Lee; daughter Lori Clarke and her husband Dane; and granddaughter Heather Clarke. The family is suggesting donations to the Southern California Railway Museum in Perris, Calif.

Modal Shift – Push or Pull?

I commend to you're the blog of Alon Levy, Pedestrian Observations.

<https://pedestrianobservations.com>

Alon Levy is a Fellow in the Transportation and Land Use program of the NYU Marron Institute. Alon's work focuses on public transportation and how to apply best practices from cities around the world. He is currently based on Berlin but draws experience from many countries. One of his recent blogs is about how



Fast, frequent, new electric trains will PULL in passengers for Caltrain

to encourage motorists to use public transportation. I quote: "There's a longstanding debate among activists and academics about what is the best way of effecting modal shift from cars to public transport. *Pull* factors concern making public transport better through building more rail lines, running them more frequently, improving service convenience, or reducing fares. *Push* factors concern making driving harder through speed limits, fuel taxes, congestion pricing, and reallocation of street space from cars to public and non-motorized transport." For those that like to take a serious look at these issues and draw from worldwide experience I recommend you read the full post.

What we find with the American experience is, for the most part, that providers of public transit e.g. Caltrain and Metrolink, do not have any control over the "push" factors such as parking controls, and therefore are only left with "pull" options. Even where a regional authority such as Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority ("Metro") has some control over "push" they fail to use it to any effect. Indeed, Metro is a perfect example of making pro transit statements at the same time as spending billions on parallel freeways. Interstate 5 has been widened through the County. The parallel railroad hosting the Metrolink Antelope Valley ("AV") and Orange County ("OC") lines have not, i.e. the AV is still predominantly single track and the OC is overwhelmed with freight traffic and needs another track. Any rational organization that wanted to effect modal shift to rail would have done the rail "widening" first. Instead they make driving easier which has a Pull effect away from transit.

Piled on top of the difficulty we have of persuading people to leave their cars behind is the radical change in work schedules, and the loss of office jobs in downtown San Francisco, Los Angeles and other city centers. How much "Pull" can Caltrain and Metrolink exert to bring back sufficient passengers to justify their existence? Because make no bones about it, this

is an existential moment for many public transportation operations. So far passenger rail operators have been able to maintain existing service with federal, state and local funds, (CARES Act, CRRSA Act, and the American Rescue Plan) and the worst thing that can happen is a series of service cuts that make the service unattractive, losing even more patrons.

Caltrain, newly electrified, has the opportunity to "Pull" riders with improved service and new trains, what is known as the "sparks effect" of electrification. This won't happen if they don't have the funds to kick start an all day, frequent service, and if the timetable is unimaginative. Metrolink has fewer opportunities, but one could be Burbank Airport. Capacity exists to run at least a thirty-minute interval service between Los Angeles and Chatsworth.

Security problems, real or perceived, are a major factor in keeping riders away from trains. Once again Metro has played it wrong, hoping that riders would return and the feeling of safety in numbers would alleviate the fear from vagrants and the mentally ill. Wrong! Passengers are entitled to use a system free from harassment and anxiety. The stations and the trains **must be made safe first**.

Service integration is another issue that has been talked about but is still lagging. How easy is it to navigate through the various transit agencies and figure out how to get there, what it costs, how many different tickets, and most important, can I get back home when I want to?

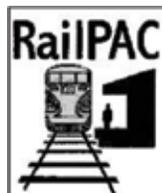
That leaves fares. It's a tough decision to reduce the revenue that you have even further to try and attract newcomers. Do the math! The new patronage has to be significant to offset a fare cut of a magnitude that will move the needle. Plus it's no use cutting fares if the service doesn't match the needs of the market. But while fed funds are available, and if like BART and Caltrain you have a decent 7 day service to multiple destinations then I believe the answer is to roll the dice, run as much service as you can at fares discounted by at least a third and use every means available to publicize it. At this juncture there's not much to lose.

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