STEEL WHEELS

PASSENGER RAIL IN CALIFORNIA AND THE WEST

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MAGAZINE OF THE WESTERN PASSENGER TRAIN COALITION

RAILPAC • ALL ABOARD ARIZONA • PASSENGER RAIL KANSAS • NEW MEXICO RA • MINNARP
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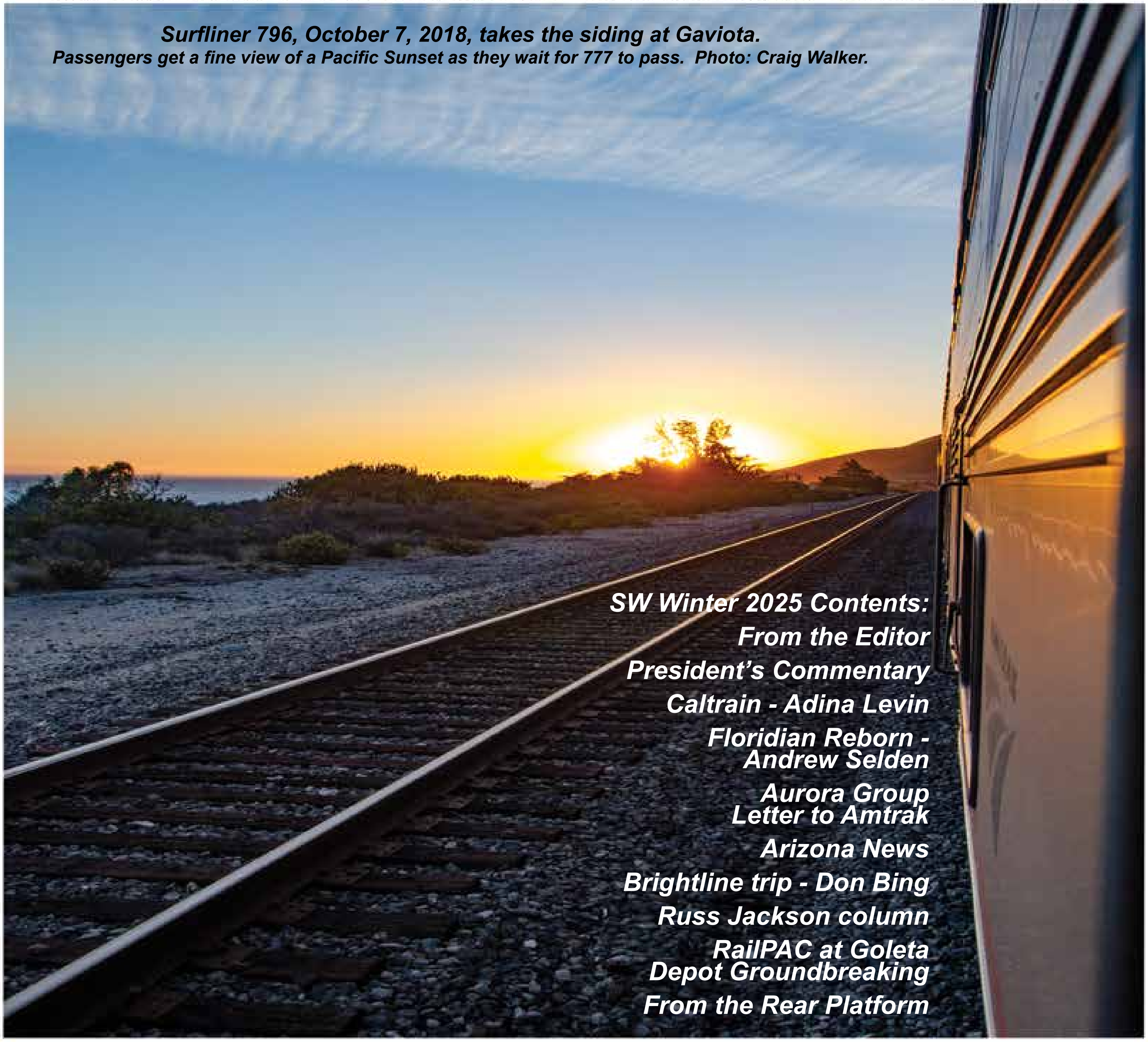

Surfliner 796, October 7, 2018, takes the siding at Gaviota.
Passengers get a fine view of a Pacific Sunset as they wait for 777 to pass. Photo: Craig Walker.

SW Winter 2025 Contents:

4th QUARTER 2024

PUBLICATION OF THE RailPAC RAIL PASSENGER ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA & NEVADA

From the Editor

By Paul Dyson, Editor, RailPAC

From the Editor – For The Last Time

It has taken me way too long to write this, for which I apologize. First, as Steve Roberts outlines in his column on page 3, RailPAC can no longer afford to publish Steel Wheels in print. Furthermore, the group has come to the conclusion that it has not been effective in recruiting new members, or in getting the passenger rail message to a big enough audience. So, this will be the final edition of Steel Wheels magazine. After 45 years of the Western Rail Passenger Review and then Steel Wheels this is a big turning point for RailPAC and a moment of reflection for me. I've been fascinated by trains since waving to the drivers of both steam and electric trains from the parapets of a couple of bridges near my home southwest of London. I supported and advocated for the Labour government's 1968 Transport Act that attempted to promote both passenger and freight on rail, and I joined British Railways in 1968 as a Student Trainee to continue the fight for a saner transport policy.

I came to this country in January, 1980, and joined RailPAC in April of that year. As time, career and other circumstances have allowed I have done my best to promote passenger rail in California for almost 45 years. If people ask me what we have achieved, I usually say about ten years' worth of progress. Such basic things as connecting Metrolink trains at Union Station, which should have happened the day they started service in October 1992, just began last year. There are still miles of single track on key routes. High Speed Rail construction started in the wrong place and is in grave danger of collapse without ever generating a single passenger mile of transportation. On the freight side, which I have been engaged in since 1980, the railroad system is becoming less and less relevant to the great majority of industry and commerce. If it's not super profitable, then the railroads don't want to carry it.

Now does this mean that there is no place for passenger rail advocacy? Absolutely not. I have carried this torch, not for what it is today but for what it could be and should be. But advocacy has changed. Term limits have made relationship building more difficult. Technology of course has completely altered the way people communicate with one another and with their elected representatives. We need people who embrace these changes and know how to exploit these new tools to be effective. For that reason I'm going to step aside for the remainder of this year and pursue some other activities.

I hope that you have found Steel Wheels to be informative and even entertaining over the past 13 plus years. We have tried to "shovel light into dark corners" to quote an old English saw, and to challenge governments to deliver a service product that we can all use and be proud of.

pauldyson@railpac.org

President's Commentary

By Steve Roberts – RailPAC President

This issue's commentary is a mix of positive news and discouraging trends and changes. First the positive news. On a beautiful Fall Sunday in October RailPAC members and other interested parties gathered to celebrate the inauguration of full overhead catenary electric service on Caltrain's route between San Francisco and San Jose. This celebration also highlighted the relaunch of Caltrain service featuring new Stadler KISS equipment, faster and more frequent service.

With a 49er game in Santa Clara and a perfect Fall Sunday, the stations and trains were bustling with riders. Everything worked, we had social time and a nice lunch at the South Bay Railroad Historical Society Museum, Brian Yanity and I gave a presentation on California electrification and future developments. Participants were also able to view the society's outstanding model railroad layouts which focus on the Southern Pacific operations in Northern California.

On the legislative front, two RailPAC supported bills were passed by the legislature and signed by the Governor. SB 1098 is designed to reengage Caltrans into the governance of state supported corridors, specifically the LOSSAN Corridor. The other piece of legislation, AB 2503, exempts electrification infrastructure (catenary and traction substations) constructed on existing railroad property from the California Environmental Quality Act.

And now the upcoming changes. As Paul Dyson notes "From the Editor's Desk" this will be the last issue of Steel Wheels in its print format. Despite the best efforts of Paul and Marcus Jung to streamline the process and find economies, cost increases continue and most importantly there are fewer and fewer printers and mail houses competing for RailPAC's low-volume business. Finally, no RailPAC member has stepped up to replace Paul in the critical editing task.

Steel Wheels was foreseen as a member recruiting tool and as a call to

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participatory advocacy. Neither of those goals have been achieved. Moving forward RailPAC will shift to on-line which is the predominant source of information for Millennials and Gen Z. We will be working on website renewal during the next quarter and hope to mimic the content of Steel Wheels as part of the website. RailPAC needs to be an organization of politically active members.

The discouraging news has been building for years and is certainly reflected in Paul's comments. While the Caltrain celebration recreated the positive vibe and camaraderie of earlier RailPAC meetings, turnout was at best modest. In fact, progress has been stalled for almost three decades. This is a result of politics, governance, passenger car supply chain failures, railroad operating practices and mismanagement.

One of the most impactful governance failures was in 2000 when the California Department of Finance vetoed Caltrans' initiative to exercise an option for additional Surfliner type cars. This led to shortages in capacity, with rebuilt 40-year-old Comet cars and Horizon fleet leased to address this shortage. The next chapter was the ill-fated Nippon-Sharyo bi-level failure with the substitute Venture cars still in the process of being delivered. With limited equipment resources new routes and frequencies could not be added to the state funded routes.

Another governance failure negatively impacted California High-Speed Rail. The original plan was to use the bond funds to construct the book-end segments in the Bay Area and Southern California. But strong local opposition forced the agency to refocus its efforts in the Central Valley.

While the concept of local control with closer links to local communities and local transit has appeal, reality has revealed the downside to Joint Power Agencies (JPA) and county ownership of rail rights-of-way. This has been especially problematic in Southern California. The JPA and county rail owners find themselves very susceptible to neighborhood opposition, with virtual veto power over capital improvements that have regionwide benefits. This has negatively impacted capacity projects needed to fully reimagine Metrolink into a regional rail service. Also, with agencies giving local transit projects a higher priority, regionwide commuter rail initiatives, such as LA Union Station run-through tracks, stall.

National political conflicts also have had a negative impact. The past 40 years has been one of the United States periodic conflicts between rural and urban areas. A lack of consistent funding for rail passenger service has been "collateral damage" from this power rivalry.

Failures in the rail passenger car manufacturing industry have impacted the goal of improved rail service. The decade plus delay in the delivery of the CAF single-level cars (which included designs for coaches and café cars) prevented Amtrak from fully reequipping its eastern long-distance trains with new equipment and relaunching the eastern long-distance product. It also precluded the option of increasing the order to re-equip the Capital Limited and City of New Orleans with single-level cars freeing up Superliners. Amtrak management had to nurse CAF along to get the basic order delivered (no coach or café or additional car add-ons).

The Nippon-Sharyo failure not only impacted Caltrans, but it also impacted Amtrak. A successful bilevel car design could have allowed Amtrak to incrementally purchase new bilevels to expand capacity and replace wrecked Superliners.

For most routes on-time performance, driven by freight railroad operating practices, has always been a problem for Amtrak. The recent shift to the operation of even longer trains has made the situation dramatically worse. Poor on-time performance for Amtrak trains results in a substantial loss in ticket revenues and increased costs. Unless this issue is resolved it calls into question the viability of the current long-distance train business model (the regularly scheduled transportation product). Irregular tour train operations could be the only future option.

Finally, the recent election once again places Amtrak in "survivor" mode, a position it has been in for most of its existence. Amtrak will likely have just the bare minimum for operations and little or no capital to make investments in growth. With cutbacks in authorizations the capital infusion from the Infrastructure Bill will only replace the most deteriorated of its life-expired assets leaving nothing for expansion. Expect Amtrak to be laser focused on its revenue/cost ratio with the goal to once again reach the point it achieved in 2019 when ticket revenues (with help from strong Acela revenues) equaled above the rail operating costs on a systemwide basis. This will be the story Amtrak wants to take to a fiscally minded Congress. To achieve that goal expect consists right sized at their most efficient level (about 220 - 260 passengers) to minimize costs while assuring very high load factors and high-ticket yields.

Editor's note: *In 2000 I traveled to Alsom's factory in Hornell NY with a colleague from the freightcar leasing company that employed us. We had the idea that if we could continue the production line of the Surfliner cars we could market car and locomotive sets as complete trains. Potential customers would be the state rail organizations such as Illinois, Michigan and California. Our employer leased commercial aircraft at that time and we felt that we could convince management that 5 cars and a locomotive would be the rail equivalent of a 737 or A 320. Well, we weren't persuasive enough and candidly did not have good proposal put together before the production line closed with the last delivery to California. I can't help but think that, had we succeeded, we'd be in a very different position today with both regional and long distance trains. What might have been….*

Caltrain Finances Improving; New Funding Still Needed

By Adina Levin, Green Caltrain, greencaltrain.com

Increased ridership on electric trains, lower costs for electricity than forecast, and financial discipline have improved Caltrain's financial outlook, but not nearly enough to prevent the need for new funding.

Caltrain's finance committee got a **first look at a draft operating budge**t for FY2025 and a draft 10-Year Strategic Financial Plan on December 16.

Electric Service - Lower Than Expected Electric Costs, Higher Ridership

The cost of electricity was a big uncertainty before electric service started. Based on the first full month of electrified service, Caltrain staff was able to confirm that the electric trains used more than 20% less energy than projected, saving $7.2M in electricity cost ($19.5M original vs $12.3M revised). As expected, Caltrain also saved $2 million in fuel costs by transitioning away from diesel trains.

Caltrain is pursuing more strategies to improve its budget for electric service, by signing up to receive Low Carbon Fuel Standard Program credits, and pursuing more strategies to generate financial benefit from regenerative braking and battery storage.

Higher Ridership and Better Fare Revenue

And in the first full month of electric service, Caltrain's **overall ridership jumped by 17%, and weekend ridership jumped by 38%**. Weekend ridership has surpassed pre-pandemic levels, with electric service that is faster and twice as frequent.

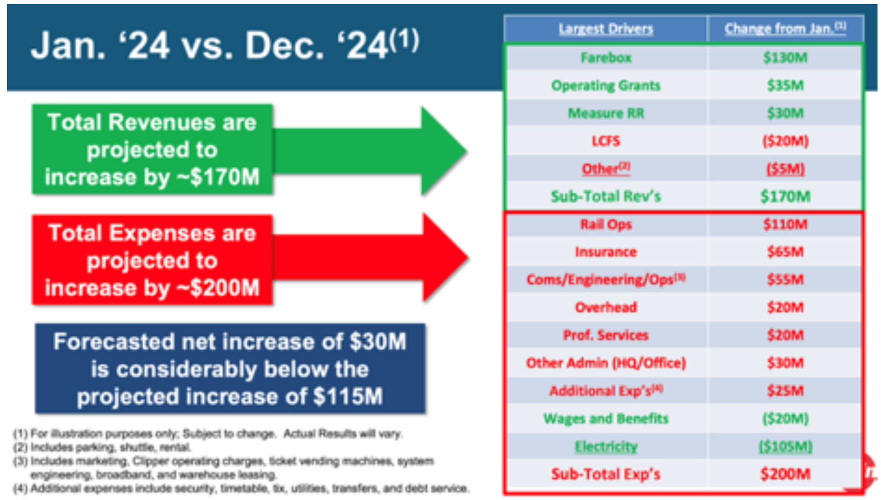
The higher ridership is contributing to fare revenue that is projected to be $130 million better than estimated at the beginning of the year.

Other Cost Reductions and Increases

Caltrain has taken other steps to limit costs, including reducing the costs of its contract with TASI by over $30 million, and reductions and delays in hiring and other expenses. However, costs of insurance, maintenance, utilities, professional services, communications, and overhead were up by $9.3 million.

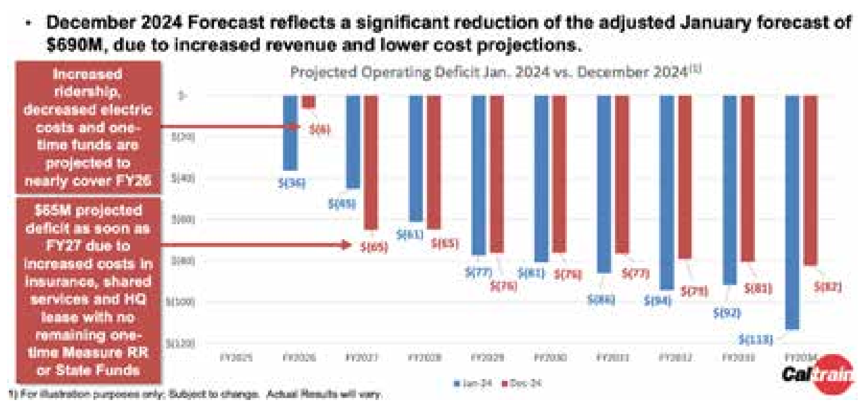
With these changes, Caltrain's financial picture is significantly better than forecast at the beginning of the year.

Revenue Strategies - Funding Gap Remains



Despite the positive news on the finances of electric service, Caltrain continues to expect operating shortfalls of $65 million after FY25 when one-time federal and state funding sources run out, given the gradual ridership recovery from pandemic drops. (Note that the jump in costs in FY2029 is due to service increases planned and committed to the federal government as a condition of electrification funding.)

Caltrain is working on non-fare revenue opportunities including leasing real estate for development, as well as solar, cell towers and EV charging; advertising, marketing and station naming, and other strategies.



Caltrain has planned fare increases of ~4% to 5% annually over the next 3 years - having refrained from increasing fares since the start of the pandemic - and 3% annually thereafter. Caltrain will also be reviewing its fare strategies, bearing in mind that increasing fares can be counterproductive by decreasing ridership.

Measure RR, passed in 2020, remains critical. Revenues are expected to account for 50% to 60% of total revenues.

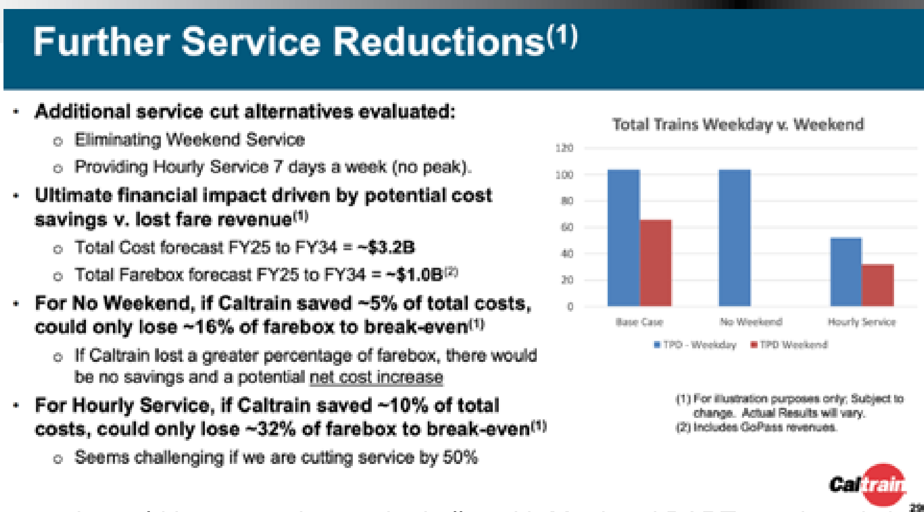
Service Cuts Won't Solve The Problem

Cutting service - by reducing service to hourly all day or cutting weekend service, won't solve Caltrain's financial gap. That would likely cut ridership and reduce revenue by more than the savings in operating costs.

Funding Measure Options

Caltrain is participating in regional measure discussions, which are moving to the legislature in the New Year. MTC is polling on a few regional measure options that would cover Caltrain.

The agency is also pursuing a backup plan for a Caltrain-specific measure, but this carries a big risk that is greater than the 2020 Measure RR. The challenge is San Francisco, which deeply depends on Muni and BART, which have post-pandemic deficits much larger than Caltrain's. If Caltrain attempts to run a single-agency

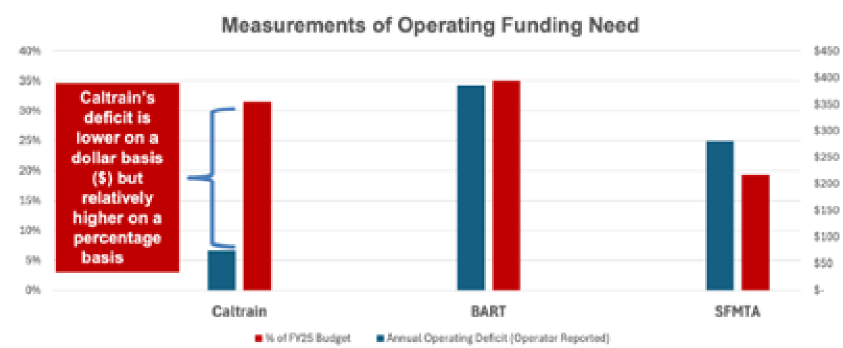


measure, it would be competing on the ballot with Muni and BART, an absurd choice for voters, and a risk overall to the transit system, and likely a high risk to Caltrain which serves a small slice of the city.

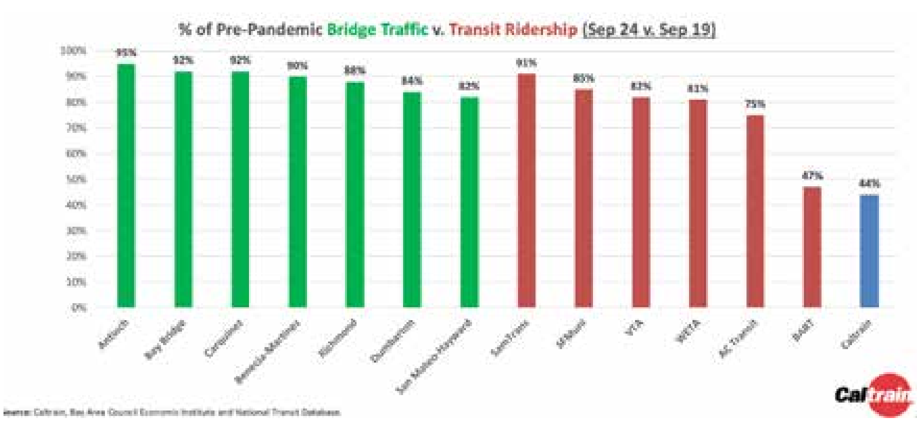
Some Peninsula corridor leaders have implied in recent months in the funding discussions, that Caltrain is in better financial shape than other major agencies.

Compared to other large Bay Area services, Caltrain needs fewer dollars ($65 million in the fiscal years after $25), but its deficit is higher on a percentage basis.

The Bay Area's transit system is essential to keep congestion off the roads, and to achieve our climate and housing goals. The Peninsula Corridor is better off if the region works together.



Caltrain's ridership, similar to BART, remains less than 50% of pre-pandemic levels.



Fares, Payment, and Ridership Recovery

Fare policy and payment will be a critical factor in Caltrain's efforts to regain ridership, for individuals and for organizations. The board finance committee discussed plans for the future of the Go Pass, the employer pass that was the agency's largest source of revenue before the pandemic. At the committee, staff shared that the number of customers has declined from over 40 to under 10, and the program needs to be re-invented.

The discussion of organizational passes did not mention the region's successful Bay Pass all agency transit pass pilot, which has a long waiting list with over 100 potential customers. The Bay Pass is serving customers including the City of Menlo Park, which had been a Go Pass customer but prefers Bay Pass because it meets more of its employees travel needs; San Francisco-based Open AI, which was relatively small before Covid and chose BayPass as its first transit pass, and customers such as San Francisco Airport which for which a multi-agency pass is a better fit.

Public commenter Adrian Brandt, who serves on the Caltrain Citizens' Advisory Committee and outcoming committee member Dev Davis discussed the possibility of transitioning to a distance-based fare model, which discourages short trips because of large zone fare jumps. This has long been a CAC recommendation, and the region's Fare Integration Task Force recommended standardizing regional fares starting with BART and Caltrain, which was modeled to significantly increase ridership. Apparently, a concern is that without faregates, some customers might take advantage of lower short-trip prices to skip payment, and not get caught by fare enforcement. This would benefit from analysis, since Caltrain already serves many short trips within a zone with this issue; moving to fairer fares for a few more short trips seems likely to have more benefits from increased ridership than drawbacks from people cadging free rides from Millbrae to San Bruno.

Davis also talked about ways to encourage and market the trips for recreation and entertainment that are growing rapidly with Caltrain's better weekend schedule. The discussion did not yet mention the upcoming release of Open Payment, which will allow people to pay for transit with credit/debit cards and Apple/Google/Samsung Pay, a more convenient solution for visitors and impulse trips.

Over the coming year, there will be important opportunities to weigh in on fare policy, and on funding opportunities at the regional and state level.

FLORIDIAN REBORN

By Andrew Selden

Effective November 10, the long-rumored revival of a one-seat ride from Chicago to the Atlantic Coast Corridor and Florida became reality when Amtrak began operation of a through train combining the Chicago-Washington, DC Capitol Limited with the Silver Star from Washington, DC to Miami. The new train was renamed the Floridian and re-numbered as Trains 40 and 41. Amtrak had used the same name for a train that also ran between Chicago and Miami on a much more direct routing via Louisville and Nashville, but was eliminated in the great long distance route elimination of October, 1979. The train numbers were previously used on both the Three Rivers train and Amtrak's Broadway Limited (both, NY-Philadelphia-Chicago). The new numbers create the anomaly that Train 40 travels west, from Washington, when other westbounds carry odd numbers, and No. 41 travels east from Chicago when most eastbounds use even numbers.

The "new" train uses single-level Amfleet coaches (four cars) and just two Viewliner sleepers, an Amfleet café car and a Viewliner diner and baggage car.

The short northernmost part of the route of the Silver Star between Washington, DC and New York was eliminated. Passengers to or from points north of Washington now must transfer there to or from NEC trains. We expected but have not seen any griping about that.

Amtrak described the Floridian scheme as "temporary" and attributed the move to eliminating the Silver Star's two daily deadhead moves through the East River tunnels in New York City between Sunnyside Yard and Penn Station while the East River tubes undergo rebuilding.

This elimination of two train movements is no doubt helpful to reduce traffic through the diminished capacity tunnels during construction, but a reduction of one percent or less hardly warrants the Floridian's route restructuring. We suspect the much more important consequence of the restructuring was the actual motivation: the combined train uses single-level cars, freeing up about a dozen Superliners that had been equipping the Capitol Limited. The coaches and sleepers will be re-assigned to equipment- and capacity-starved western Superliner trains, except the dysfunctional Cross Country Café cars (badly-conceived converted Superliner diners) will be laid up at Beech Grove. No one will miss them.

Media coverage was almost uniformly awful. Many called the combined trains a "new route," and derided its round-about routing and lengthy transit time between its endpoints. None appeared to get the idea that, just as with any Interstate highway, intermediate point usage is much more important for an inter-regional train route than the small percentage who travel between the literal endpoints.

For its part, Amtrak offered mixed signals about how seriously it views the new combined service. On the positive side, it restored "traditional dining" service in the Floridian's almost-new Viewliner dining car. This is not "a step up" from the inedible glop in Stephen Gardner's "flexible dining" previously inflicted on Capitol Limited passengers; it is a universe apart. Coach passengers also may use the dining car on a space-available basis for a set flat-rate price per person of $20 for breakfast, $25 for lunch and a whopping $45 for dinner (which includes the one free wine or beer at dinner). Another positive: Amtrak applied discounted coach fares to most itineraries using the new service. On the other hand, Amtrak also applied stunningly high sleeping car fares to the Floridian. For a couple traveling between Chicago and southern Florida, a Viewliner Bedroom was priced at close to $3000 for the two-night, two-day trip. Amtrak service, on a ridiculous itinerary, at deluxe cruise ship prices.

In its first few weeks of operation, time-keeping has not been the Floridian's strong suit. Most trains have run late at their end points (and most intermediate points) by one to three hours, despite programmed recovery time in the schedules.

Another flaw in the train's planning is that insufficient sleeping car space is provided in just two Viewliner sleepers. Nine Viewliner I sleeping cars are laid up on the East Coast for lack of required brake and other routine maintenance. It would take only five of these cars to equip each trainset with a third sleeper to respond to latent demand, so we can infer that it's not just western Superliner trains that Amtrak wants to under-equip to under-perform. The Capitol Limited had five Bedrooms plus the Family Room and Handicap Bedroom in its single Superliner sleeper; the Floridian has just four Bedrooms (and two Handicap Bedrooms) combined in its two Viewliner sleepers. The Viewliner cars' Bedrooms have some advantages: noticeably higher ceilings, the upper window, and more baggage storage capacity in the cavity above the door.

Because the Floridian, south of Washington, DC, is still the Silver Star in function if not name, it also suffers the long-running two and a half hour detour west from Auburndale Junction (and back again) to serve Tampa. Years ago, a Tampa section of the train split at Auburndale. The Silver Meteor bypasses Tampa altogether with not so much as a connecting shuttle bus. Serving Tampa is valuable—or would be—because it is the center of the Tampa-St. Petersburg-Sarasota region, with a population of around five million and a vast tourism plus seasonal migration population. This is alike with Amtrak's disregard for cities such as Phoenix, Las Vegas and Columbus. These cities are all doing quite well without Amtrak—it's Amtrak that loses from not serving them.

We will use the new Floridian, and if it's less than 140 minutes late into Chicago, Borealis, to return home from South Florida after New Year's. Expect a first-hand review of the experience in a future Newsletter.

November 19, 2024

Mr. Anthony R. Coscia, Chairman

National Railroad Passenger Corporation
c/o Windels Marx Lane & Mittendorf, LLP
120 Albany Street Plaza, 6th Floor
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

Ref: Amtrak leadership must present a realistic and executable long-distance network business plan at the December 4th Board meeting.

Dear Mr. Coscia:

As stewards of America's Railroad, my colleagues and I urge you to level with the American people.

During the public Board meeting in Seattle on December 4th, it's important that you explain Amtrak's current predicament to taxpayers and the traveling public. The lack of serviceable bi-level Superliner cars not only makes it impossible for Amtrak to deliver on any of the growth goals promised in its FY24-29 Five-Year Plan but also makes continued operation of the long-distance network, as it exists today, highly doubtful.

The Equipment Situation In A Nutshell

Despite Superliner wreck repairs completed in FY24 Amtrak's bi-level long-distance fleet remains severely capacity constrained. While redeploying Superliners from the Capitol Limited compensates for a portion of the shortfall, the demands upon the eastern long-distance fleet have increased. This is particularly pronounced in connection with single level Viewliner sleeping car capacity. Amtrak has failed to return to service Viewliner I's stored since the pandemic. Moreover, our team can identify no overhauls performed on Viewliner I's in at least two years.

Upon completion of the East River tunnel repairs it is unclear how the Silver Star will be returned to service due to across-the-board equipment shortages.

There is no capacity to institute daily service of the Sunset Limited nor the Cardinal.

There is no equipment available to support additional long-distance routes.

New Bi-Level Cars Are A Long Way Off – If Ever

Although Amtrak identified the urgent need to procure new long-distance equipment 15 years ago, it was still completely unprepared to act when IIJA became law in November 2021. It spent more than two years writing specifications for unique, never before built designs. It did not send the first RFP out to potential bidders until a year ago. Since then, it has amended the RFP 10 times, extended the deadline for submitting bids by seven months and the target date for awarding a contract from December of this year to some unspecified time during the summer of next year. It has done nothing to procure any single level equipment.

Once Amtrak signs a contract, it projects that, under "normal circumstances," it could take as long as ten years to complete delivery and commissioning of the entire order. The General and Legislative Annual Report & Fiscal 2025 Grant Request suggests deliveries of equipment are anticipated to stretch out to at least 2037, 12 to 13 years from now. Experience with past procurements suggests that inevitable delays will extend the timeline even further as illustrated by New Acela, Midwest Venture cars and the Viewliner II projects.

The Prospect of Iija Rescission Has Emerged

Because Amtrak has not "obligated" any of the billions of dollars Congress appropriated for long-distance fleet renewal, it now faces the real possibility that the new Congress and Administration may rescind appropriated but unobligated funding.

Amtrak Has No Contingency Plan

When contradictions were found between the "The Strategic Blueprint," the Five-Year Plan for FY24-29 and the Legislative and Grant Request for FY25, I asked Amtrak if there were any subsequent plans or plan updates. The answer was no.

We previously suggested a number of ways that Amtrak might be able to obtain additional equipment more quickly. Amtrak rejected each idea out of hand.

Clearly, management's only plan is a hope that the existing Superliners will last for the next ten or more years until new equipment arrives. Hope, however, is not a plan and Management's "Hope" is not realistic.

Amtrak Board's Duty To The Public

Derailments are an unfortunate but inevitable part of railroad operations. Management should anticipate, prepare for them and incorporate such variations in capacity in commercial, operating and financial plans.

When loss of equipment occurs the circumstances will force Amtrak to make politically unpopular choices. What will they be?

- Shorter trains and higher fares?
- Less than daily service?
- Route consolidations?
- Outright route eliminations?
- Or some combination of the above?
- Which routes does it plan to cut first? Which ones will get priority? Taxpayers and travelers have a right to know. You have a duty to tell them.

Sincerely,

James M. Tilley

President-Florida Coalition of Rail Passengers

Vice Chair-**TheAuroraGroup**

cc: Members - Florida Coalition of Rail Passengers
Members-***TheAuroraGroup***
Mr. Ron Batory
Mr. Pete Buttigieg
Ms. Yvonne Brathwaite Burke
Mr. David Capozzi
Mr. Lanhee J. Chen
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Mr. Albert DiClemente
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Arizona News –

Earl Van Swearingen – All Aboard Arizona

ALL ABOARD ARIZONA

Passenger Train Service Update for Arizona

Americans with Disabilities (ADA) compliant station in Benson

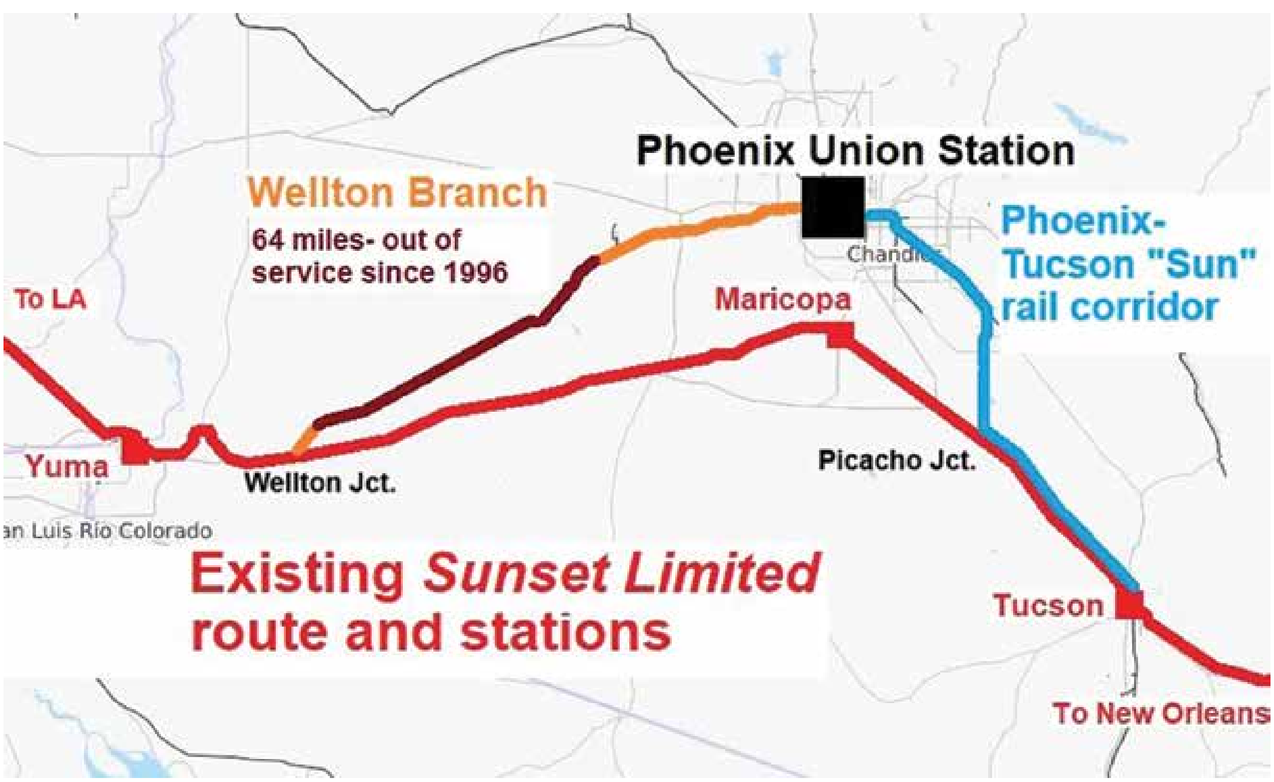
Benson is scheduled to have a completed ADA compliant platform by the Fall of 2026. It is in the design stage at this time. Benson is an important city for Amtrak. Although the city has a population of about 5,000 residents, it is the railhead for Cochise County with a population of around 125,000. Sierra Vista, a city of 45,000, is just over 30 miles from the station.

Daily Sunset service through Phoenix

Born in 1894, as a New Orleans – Los Angeles luxury train, the Sunset Limited, the oldest continuously operating named train in the United States, is a train with a long history of surviving against the odds. Operated by the Southern Pacific, which was more recently absorbed by the Union Pacific, the Sunset survived the extensive cutbacks of privately operated passenger trains in the late 1960s. But the train suffered service downgrades with its frequency ultimately being reduced from daily to three days a week by 1970. The Sunset route also survived the massive cutbacks with the creation of Amtrak in 1971. Upon takeover, Amtrak enhanced onboard services, but the route remained triweekly.

The Sunset Limited's route originally included Phoenix. The city was on the Wellton Branch line, also known as the Wellton-Picacho Cutoff, that arched between Wellton (a junction about 40 track miles east of Yuma), through Phoenix onto Picacho (a junction 50 track miles northwest of Tucson). About 64 miles of the Wellton-Picacho Cutoff, from east of Roll in Yuma County to west of Arlington (near the Palo Verde nuclear generating station) in Maricopa County, was put out-of-service since 1996 due to low freight volume. Amtrak could not pay the amount the railroad wanted for keeping the now deactivated 64-mile segment maintained. Thus, the gap put Phoenix on a dead-end branch line, now called the Union Pacific Phoenix Subdivision. As a result, the Sunset is now routed between Yuma and Tucson over the mainline through Maricopa (35 miles drive from downtown Phoenix), the closest Amtrak station; ending direct service to nearly five million people in the greater Phoenix metropolitan area. Phoenix now has the distinction of being the largest city in the United States without direct intercity passenger train service!

Due to its triweekly service and loss of Phoenix, the Sunset had become financially one of the poorest performing trains on Amtrak. In an effort to improve its performance, Amtrak proposed returning the Sunset to a daily train. In 2010, Amtrak published the proposed daily service in the Sunset Limited/ Texas Eagle Performance Improvement Plan of 2010. The proposal showed that equipment utilization on the triweekly train was so poor, the train could operate daily without any additional rolling stock. No route changes were to be included. The Sunset would continue to bypass Phoenix. Nothing came of this proposal.



Recently, under pressure to expand, Amtrak found making the Sunset daily a source of low hanging fruit. The proposal for a daily Sunset is now a Federal Railroad Administration funded Capital Investment & Development Program and is in the process of a service development plan. One major

Trip Report

Don Bing, RailPAC Board member, Ventura County

Brightline Florida – the template for Las Vegas High Speed service

I'd like to share my impressions riding Brightline, Florida's new privately built intercity rail service. My journey was a round trip in "Premium" class between Orlando Airport and Miami on Thursday, November 14. The other fare class is "Smart." The train consist is six Siemens Venture cars with a Siemens Charger locomotive on each end. Total train horsepower is 8000. One car is Premium class, the remaining five are Smart. The cars and locomotives were built at Sacramento,CA.

Each way takes 3.5 hours. From Orlando to the first stop at West Palm Beach takes about 2 hours. The remaining stops are Fort Lauderdale, Aventura, and the Miami terminus. On the new tracks from Orlando to the Atlantic coast, train speeds clocked up to 120 miles per hour. However, the north-south segment parallel to the coast is on freight-shared tracks with numerous grade crossings. This means significantly slower speeds and a rougher ride.

Every seat is reserved for both "Smart" and "Premium" coaches. Tickets show the assigned seat number. If the train you want is fully booked, you'll need to purchase a seat on another train. Tickets may be purchased via the Brightline app, at a station kiosk, or in person at either terminal station. Carry-on bags are quickly x-rayed a la TSA. Baggage may be checked between Miami and Orlando only.

At the Orlando Airport and Miami stations all passengers have access to a restaurant and bar. For Premium class, the lounges offer complementary food, snacks, and beverages, including alcohol. The food offerings are upscale and sophisticated, and presented attractively. Long disposable bamboo utensils come wrapped as a complete set.

On board, Premium seating is 2+1, in Smart 2+2. Premium service includes drinks, food and snacks. Passengers in Smart class are provided a menu to purchase food and beverages from their phones. Items in both classes are delivered by cart.

I found my leather seat in Premium to be comfortably wide with more than adequate leg room. Unlike Amtrak there is no footrest. The seat back does not recline; instead a button lets the bottom cushion slide forward. All seats have a nearby outlet for charging electronic equipment. Tray tables are sufficiently large for computer work, however a cup holder would be welcome. (I had to hold my beverage on higher speed curves to prevent spilling.) A few facing seats have a table. There are overhead luggage racks plus additional space for bags at the end of the car.

Restrooms are clean and spacious. A large, illuminated button opens the restroom. When inside, another button closes and locks the door, activates lighting, and the "occupied" light. To wash up, a Dyson fixture wets one's hands and then air dries them. To exit, the inside button unlocks and opens the door.

Premium class attracts a professional clientele at a premium price. On the daytime leg, most passengers were on their computers or making business calls. The evening return trip was all about drinks and quiet conversation.

Everything about Brightline is clean, efficient, visually appealing, and features state-of-the-art technology. The stations and trains are amply staffed by professional, service-oriented personnel. Indeed, Brightline represents the best that privately funded passenger rail can offer. We may reasonably expect the same when Brightline West to Las Vegas begins service.

Arizona News(Continued)

change in this proposal over the original 2010 proposal, is that this proposal includes routing the Sunset back through Phoenix. Thus, this proposal is now more complicated. It is more than just hard negotiating with Union Pacific for a daily train and subsequent track work. A daily Sunset through Phoenix would require bringing back the out-of-service segment west of Phoenix, a major expense. An Arizona Department of Transportation study, the Wellton Branch Rehabilitation Study of 2014, concluded that the reopening of the branch line solely for passenger service would be cost prohibitive. It would require both passenger and freight volume in sufficient quantity to justify the investment. At the time the freight volume was too low.

There is hope, however. Union Pacific is putting a new container terminal in Phoenix for service from Southern California to Phoenix, initially, on a circuitous route via Tucson. The terminal is, at first, being built cheap as a 'pop up' facility, but if sufficient volume is realized, a permanent facility will be put in place, receiving boxes from up and down the west coast. Ultimately, total freight and passenger volume could then justify reactivating the more direct Wellton Branch line to Phoenix. To help, the state of Arizona could be called upon to provide transportation enhancement money along with a federal grant.

If Sunset service through Phoenix does not reach fruition, would Amtrak still work toward creating a daily Sunset? Hopefully, but only time will tell. Passenger train advocates should encourage the state of Arizona to do whatever they can do toward rehabilitating the out-of-service section of the Wellton Branch.

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

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

Working On It

By Russ Jackson, RailPAC Editor Emeritus

Back in TV history there was a series called "Maverick" that starred James Garner and Jack Kelly as brothers Bret and Bart Maverick. One of its famous episodes had Bret conned out of his money by a crooked banker. To get it back Bart, under another name, worked to con the banker while Bret sat on a chair 'whitlin' and when townspeople asked how he was doing he would reply "I'm working on it." When Bart got the money back they both left town leaving the folks wondering how Bret did it. So we ask Amtrak how they are doing spending all that money Congress gave them.

Are they "working on it?" Well, sort of. Two new trains have been announced, the *Borealis* that now runs from Chicago to Minneapolis and the *Floridian* that runs from Chicago to Miami. Very exciting, and they are generating much press interest. The *Borealis* came with its own cash from the states, and the *Floridian* is reshuffling two existing trains into one using new Viewliner equipment. That's all good news. Are they working on anything new? In the pipeline are three projects they should be worked on harder. 1) The New Orleans to Mobile trains keep getting derailed while various issues are solved. It's been ten years. 2) The requirement of 14 Superliner cars being tied up running Chicago to Carbondale every day instead of providing much needed capacity increase on the long distance trains is another that has lasted for too many years. The CN must be convinced. 3) To their credit, Amtrak is working on restoring and refreshing Superliner and other cars at the Beech Grove shops.

What they aren't working on is restoring the *Sunset Limited* to daily, returning it to Phoenix, and the extension to Florida. Anthony Lee called our attention to an article published October 17 in the Jacksonville Times-Union about the train that was put "on hold" after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. "Earlier this year Amtrak released a mandated study that found multiple ways to re-establish the route through Jacksonville." Yes, another "study" that is already on the shelf? Hold on, maybe not. "To resume the tri-weekly trains as the service was before would cost $32.7 million. To extend the daily *City of New Orleans* to Orlando $57.6 million. To create a new train NOL to Orlando $96.6 million. BUT, it didn't find the money to do any of it." No surprise there. "And they have done nothing since the study came out." No surprise there either.

HOWEVER, "A grassroots advocacy organization, the Sunset Marketing and Revitalization Team, met that day in Jacksonville to discuss re-establishing the *Sunset* service." For the Jacksonville article an Amtrak spokesman said, "It is now up to either Congress or the four states affected to choose an option and COME UP WITH THE FINANCING TO RE-ESTABLISH the service. BINGO. They want it back, but you guys out there have to pay for it? NO surprise there. And the no growth policy continues despite all the money Amtrak has. You can ask this writer what he's doing about all this and my answer will be the same as Bret Maverick, "I'm working on it. For 40 years." "If we don't say it, who will?" It's your rail transportation that is at stake.

RailPAC Board and members attended the groundbreaking ceremony for the new Goleta Depot, September 12, 2024.

L-R: James Smith, Paul Dyson, State Senator Monique Limon, Dennis Story, Brian Yannity and Guy Holloman.

Not in the picture but deserving great credit for the project is RailPAC member and former Goleta Council Member Michael Bennett.RailPAC was involved in the 1980s and early 90s in campaigning for a station at Goleta. Initially the first San Diegans went only to Santa Barbara, but there was a clear need for a station closer to UCSB, and Goleta itself was a growing community.

The new depot will be a great asset to the community, and we hope that the City of Goleta and the County of Santa Barbara will campaign vigorously for additional trains and capacity improvements.

By Paul Dyson, Editor

Parting Shots

After the merger of Seaboard Air Line and Atlantic Coast Line, followed by the merger of Seaboard Coast Line into CSX, one of the two main lines between Virginia and North Carolina effectively became redundant, and part has been abandoned. Now, the States of North Carolina and Virginia are advancing plans to reopen the abandoned route, known as the 'S' line, to form a mid-speed passenger route. This line will not only connect the two states but in effect become an extension of the northeast corridor ("NEC"), or the East Coast Corridor as it should be known. (See page 12 et seq of the November "Trains" magazine for the full story).

The Trains story has revived a thought I have been developing over the last year regarding routes in the western states. While we don't have abandoned lines, we do have routes with very light freight traffic that have potential for development. Most of the routes in question are owned by Union Pacific and the underutilization is the result of mergers with Western Pacific and Southern Pacific, as well as UP's operating and commercial philosophy and practice. While it is tempting to consider nationalization of the whole network, I don't see it as a realistic proposition. But the carriers should be forced to relinquish control of those lines that are no longer serving the public in any meaningful way. I would begin with the California Coast from Moorpark to San Jose, and the Southern Pacific and D&RGW lines from the Bay Area to Pueblo, CO and Denver. Add to this one of the routes across Kansas and Eastern CO to connect to St.Louis and Chicago and there is the basis for a much improved passenger and high speed intermodal route that keeps out of the way of slow moving heavy freight.

Metrolink VCTC SBCAG Santa Barbara peak hour service: Too many years ago the people of Santa Barbara voted for "a lane and a train". As we have reported many times, the lane(s) are under construction, the train fell at the first fence. We can report that an agreement is being forged between Metrolink and Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. We continue to hope.

Speaking of hope, Link-US work has started on utility relocation and other preparatory work for the run through tracks at Union Station in Los Angeles. Thanks to Metro and Caltrans this is a far more expensive and complicated task than when envisioned back in the early 1980s and before. The gradients required to go south out of the station and very severe thanks to the construction of the busway and Caltrans increasing the clearance required for overbridges. It's a start, but there doesn't seem to be any sense of urgency.

Raymer-Bernson double track: This is another project that Metro has kicked down the road for a couple of decades. Now third district Supervisor Horvath's staff have told advocates that the Supervisor is in favor of Metrolink service and double tracking but that Metrolink's analysis indicates that it is not necessary until 15 minute interval service is introduced. While this may be true on a reliable and punctual system, free of "trespasser incidents" and the like, it is indeed critical for the efficient running of the Ventura line, the Surfliners, the Coast Starlight and such freight service as Union Pacific has left. I recall when I came here that the Coast Starlight arrived in Los Angeles about 6.30pm and connected with the Southwest Chief. This ended when Metrolink started up with trains to Ventura effectively blocking eastbound trains in the early evening. Double track from LAUS to Chatsworth and at Simi should allow a better timetable for both the Starlight and Surfliner trains.

There is newspaper talk about connecting the California High Speed Rail project with the High Desert Corridor and the Brightline Las Vegas train. This logical idea has been proposed many times by RailPAC, We sincerely hope that this will cause the two organizations to cooperate in developing a compatible technology platform for rolling stock, signaling systems, power supply, ticketing and all the other essentials of a modern railway.

The new State Rail Plan is out. Analysis of its contents, together with insights on policy, news updates and opinions will henceforth be found on the website, www.railpac.org.

Steel Wheels has always stood on the shoulders of the Western Rail Passenger Review, edited by Russ Jackson. It was initially a collaboration between me and RailPAC member Jarrod Della Chiesa, but as Jarrod's business grew we had to find help in designing the layout and preparing the copy for print. We were fortunate to find Pamela Dengate, Dengate Design, who took us to a higher level of presentation. Thank you, Pamela, for your guidance, patience, and creativity in making Steel Wheels look so good. Thank you also to the many photographers who have contributed excellent images to enhance the stories, including friends in the UK, Switzerland and India. Thank you also to the many contributors who have provided professional policy analysis and opinions on every aspect of passenger rail.

I hope you have enjoyed 13 years of Steel Wheels, and that you will continue to support RailPAC as the most effective rail advocacy organization in California.

Paul Dyson, January 2025

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