STEEL WHEELS

PASSENGER RAIL IN CALIFORNIA AND THE WEST

Magazine of the Western Passenger Train Coalition

Winter 2025

In this issue...



Donner Pass Verdi, NV - Ray Lewis

President's Commentary

Overview of the Revised
Union Pacific / Norfolk Southern Merger

Revised Update on Los Angeles Union Station

A Look at Orange County Stations

The Success of the New York Congestion Relief Program

Also:

Epitaph for the NorthStar

An Update on Passenger Rail in Arizona

From the Rear Platform.

President's Commentary

Steve Roberts



Welcome to the new Steel Wheels 'E' Magazine. As I noted in the first Steel Wheels 'E' magazine, links to specific articles are on the Steel Wheels cover or one can scroll down the pages to each article. There is also a PDF version of Steel Wheels you can print to read on the train. In addition, RailPAC's new website has several features to keep RailPAC members informed and to provide resources for their advocacy. At the top of the landing page is an index with links to all the sections of the website. There is the Resources section where members will find links to agency Business Plans, performance data, projects, etc. There are maps of projects and their status. Because of the number of links this section is under development so not all links are posted yet. The Commentary section has recent commentary letters RailPAC has sent to agencies regarding proposed projects and policy actions. There is also Newswire where current articles of interest from newspapers, newsfeeds, magazines, etc. are posted.

2025 opened with the anticipation of a battle over the existence of rail passenger service. However, the dismissal of Amtrak CEO Stephen Gardner, a strategically timed reduction in management positions combined with the promise of break-even on an operating basis seemed to keep the budget cutters at bay. 2025 instead turned out to feature record ridership and ticket revenue at Amtrak. That momentum has carried into the Fall, bolstered by airline reliability issues, and changes in equipment utilization that increased capacity. In addition, strong ticket revenue and advanced bookings helped Amtrak more easily manage its cash flow during the record government shutdown.

One of the issues that is going to dominate the rail news in 2026 is the proposed Union Pacific – Norfolk Southern merger. An article in this issue of Steel Wheels outlines potential strategies UP might employ to achieve approval of the merger, the benefits of the merger and the potential negative consequences.

There certainly are a lot of promises, market potential, concerns, and strong arguments on both sides. All these outcomes are very speculative. No one can really foresee the future impact on the rail industry. The overriding view is that this merger represents a key junction for the rail industry,

with one path opening up a new pathway forward or an alternative path leading to chaos and ultimately further stagnation and market share loss. If the transcontinental merger is approved and the UP/NS continues to lose market share to trucks, the railroads will no longer have the excuse of not being transcontinental carriers.

Industry observers have all variations of what is going to happen but there is no definitive argument that offers a high probability of being correct. While the assumption is that the reaction to the UP/NS merger will be BNSF/CSX, that is not a given. Could all the remaining railroads band together in long-lasting partnerships to face the common enemy? Other rail companies might be just biding their time to see whether the merger is approved and the conditions attached to it.

Some unknowns. Will the STB impose so many conditions on the merger that UP will walk away from it? Given the importance of trade with Canada and Mexico does a CPKCS/CSX merger (with UP/NS merger trackage rights concessions) and a CN/BNSF merger (with UP/NS merger trackage rights concessions) create a superior rail network compared to a BNSF/CSX option? Will a mega-merger service meltdown lead to nationalization or will the public finally give up on rail technology?

Since the merger process is just beginning there will be many developments. However, I will be able to keep members abreast of new developments in the Commentary section of the website.

Also inside, Brian Yanity, RailPAC Vice-President South, the outlines background and current status of the transformational project in Southern California, Los Angeles Union Station run-through tracks – LINKUS.

One of the new regular features of the Steel Wheels 'E' Magazine is the sharing of articles with Rail Users Network (RUN). In this issue an overview of Congestion Pricing in Manhattan is featured. For seventy plus years, Caltrans highway Districts and highway departments in other states have tried to address traffic congestion by adding lanes, but Level of Service (average vehicle speeds) remained unchanged. New York City and other cities worldwide have changed that strategy by applying the basic economics of using price to manage the demand of a scarce resource (road capacity). As a result, New York City achieved a dramatic increase in Level of Service (faster travel times) by allowing drivers to choose value of that scarce road space. At this point, all the forecasted goals of the program have been achieved.

Predictions of traffic congestion outside the congestion management area by drivers avoiding the toll did not prove correct. There were also predictions of a loss of business in the management area. As is noted in the article, the opposite occurred.

Finally, as in other cities worldwide, opposition to the pricing plan was substantial before implementation but reversed once drivers saw the dramatic improvement in traffic flow and improved transit bus travel times and reliability. Could this be a lesson for California's urban areas?

Finally on the lighter side, there is the first part of the story of Orange County stations and their importance to the communities.

In closing, wishing everyone Happy Holidays and a productive 2026!

Overview of the Revised Union Pacific / Norfolk Southern Merger

Steve Roberts

Overview

By any measure the proposed Union Pacific – Norfolk Southern merger is a key event in railroad history. Approved or denied, the process will redefine the industry moving forward. It is also the first application of the new rail merger rules that were put in place by the Surface Transportation Board (STB) after the last round of rail mergers. The CP/KCS merger was the lone exception.

The new STB merger rules require Union Pacific to demonstrate that combining with Norfolk Southern Railway will be in the public interest and enhance competition. Union Pacific's merger application to the STB should list the initiatives that will enhance competition and generate public benefits. As part of the merger process, and mitigation requests by impacted stakeholders to the STB could add other requirements to increase competition.

As I write this, Union Pacific has yet to submit its merger application. Theoretically Union Pacific could propose a group of initiatives that would increase competition, increase public benefits and demonstrate strong support for its common carrier responsibility. Such a forward-leaning strategy would forestall potential opposition to the merger and facilitate its approval. Alternatively, the UP could go head-to-head with opponents with the aim to limit, to a bare minimum, STB's remedies to address stakeholder issues.

See excellent map of combined Union Pacific/Norfolk Southern merged network in Trains Magazine:
Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern reach $85 billion merger deal

Some Definitions

- **Reciprocal Switching** – The regulatory provision that allows a shipper served by a single rail line to request their freight be interchange to a competing railroad at the closest interchange or be served via trackage rights.
- **Paper Barriers** – A contractional provision attached to the sale or lease of a branch line to a short-line railroad limiting the ability of the short-line railroad to interchange traffic with a competing railroad.
- **Bottleneck Rail Rates** – Pricing strategies by the railroads to lengthen line hauls and increase revenue by instituting high rates to closer interchanges with other railroads.

Midwest "Watershed" Market

The area in the Midwest with sizable 800 – 900-mile markets, potentially competitive and profitable for rail, but split into two shorter-hauls with interchange delays, uncoordinated service and unfavorable pricing.

See excellent map of Midwest Watershed Market in Trains Magazine:
Analysts say stalled growth, fading pricing power drive UP–NS merger push

Initiatives that would Smooth the Merger's Approval

Outlined below are some initiatives that would address the concerns of many stakeholders and thereby enable approval of the UP/NS merger.

Key Competition Expanding Initiatives:
Changes that would result in shipper support would be:

- Full Reciprocal Switching.
- Elimination of Paper Barriers.
- A cap on Bottleneck Rates.

If Union Pacific wants to do something dramatic to curry shipper support it could initiate pre-merger service and marketing initiatives along existing North-South single carrier markets (I-5, I-35, I-55, I-75 and I-95 corridors) to demonstrate the strategies and commitment to fulfill the promise of truck to rail conversion in the 750 -1,000-mile markets.

Finally, Union Pacific will likely propose significant Canadian National and CPKCS trackage rights to increase competition in the Midwest "Watershed" area and to forestall a hostile bid for the NS.

Forward Leaning Service and Reliability Initiatives:
The key issues weighing down the merger proposal among stakeholders are the freight railroads record of inconsistent service, outright service failures and seeming institutional aversion to any service improvements. Some initiatives to reverse this perception would be:

- A companywide total focus on building a culture of consistent service.
- Expansion of shipper freight car visibility across a shipment's entire route.
- Further expansion of Automated Train Inspection Portals to increase safety of train operations.
- Expand Norfolk Southern's Short Line Interchange Project to Union Pacific routes.
- Accelerate on-network UP and NS capacity projects as the merger is reviewed to demonstrate confidence that the proposed merger will drive traffic growth and investor return from volume growth.
- Outline and begin design for UP/NS connectivity capacity projects while the merger is being reviewed.
- Hiring and training initiatives to guarantee sufficient staffing to implement the merger in the face of unforeseen events and to support traffic growth.

Public Benefit Initiatives:
While the Surface Transportation Board and high-profile stakeholders will focus on freight competition issues, the general media and the public will want to know the public benefits. Action on concessions outlined below would generate substantial positive media and support for the merger. Examples of key mitigation actions are:

- Early identification and mitigation for locations when the shift of rail traffic due to the merger may result in conflict with lineside stakeholders.

- Mitigation initiatives to deal with current lineside conflicts due to recent operational changes (trains longer than existing yard tracks and sidings).
- Settlement with Metra regarding access costs for the former Chicago & Northwestern routes in Chicago.
- Agreements with Amtrak to address the on-time performance issue in line with FRA metrics. In addition:
    - Agreement with Amtrak on its priority service expansions with the only investments for passenger service required.
    - Daily Sunset Ltd
    - Operation of Daily Sunset Ltd. without the requirement to rebuild the Wellton Branch.
    - Service Atlanta, GA to Ft. Worth via Meridian, MS.

Hard Costs and Soft Costs:
When a railroad looks at mitigation investments to gain support or offset negative consequences of the merger, costs can be separated into two categories – hard costs and soft costs. Hard costs are something like a grade separation on a route with higher merger traffic. A soft cost is a concession, i.e. reciprocal switching, trackage rights, etc. that might reduce the railroad's post-merger traffic, that may never be implemented because UP's pricing and service post-merger is top-notch.

The Benefits and Potential of the Union Pacific-Norfolk Southern Merger

Overview
The new STB competition requirements and synergies of the merger create the potential for UP to establish a new paradigm for freight rail with a focus on volume and market share growth. This would reverse volume declines due to the combination of inconsistent service, outright service failures, aggressive rate increases and the singular focus on yield maximization.

Overcoming the Legacy of Merger "Meltdowns":
The public and regulatory focus on management competency means there will be a strong incentive to "Get it Right". Aiding UP in its effort is a clear history of what can go wrong and the need to focus on the details. If achieved, resources other railroads spent on dealing with chaos can instead be used to provide consistent and reliable service. This will mean traffic growth through highway diversions.

Network Advantages of the Combined UP/NS:
Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern RR are both strong networks which when combined will have key direct routes and alternative routes that bypass Chicago and New Orleans. The two key new connecting routes are:

- Kansas City to Springfield. Ill., the direct route from Midwest to upper Midwest.
- Meridian Speedway via Dallas Ft. Worth – direct route from Southern California to cities in the Southeast.

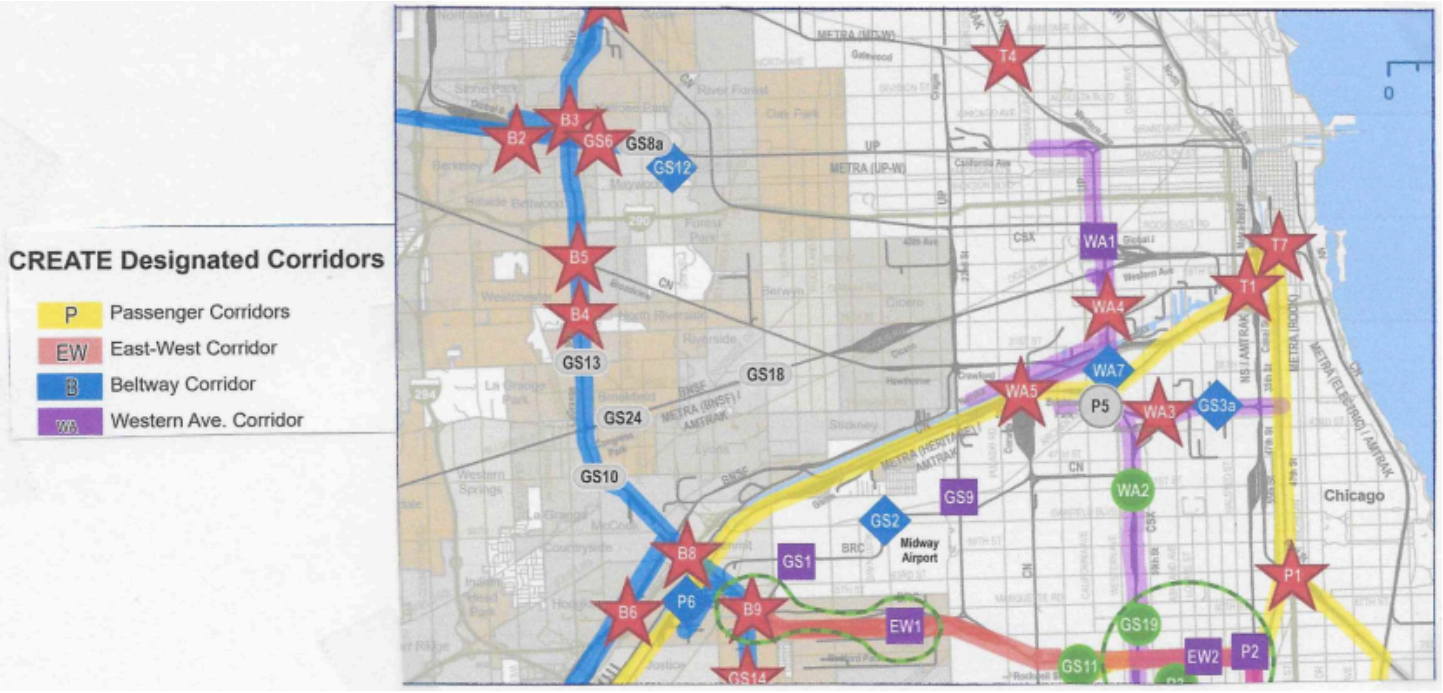
The UP/NS connection in Chicago is direct (Western Ave. Corridor) with trackage already owned by both companies (See Map 1). The Union Pacific – Norfolk Southern Western Ave connection route is the purple line from the left (west) jog (UP) to the right (east) jog midway along the corridor. The right jog links to the Norfolk Southern

at Ashland Ave yard. The Western Ave. Corridor has benefited from Chicago's CREATE Program to ease congestion and speed train movements. Planning and design for additional projects is underway.

Improved Competition:
The potential restructuring of the rail network through merger concessions, reciprocal switching, an end to bottleneck rates and paper barriers, expanded CN and CP/KCS trackage rights have the potential of increasing the value of rail service to shippers resulting in additional traffic.

Market Potential and Benefits:
There is a huge upside market potential in converting existing truck traffic to rail, especially from the West to the eastern side of the Watershed area and from the East to the western side of the Watershed area. Traffic growth means more jobs for a key stakeholder in the merger, organized labor. Finally, resolving the Amtrak on-time performance issue will mean more ridership, ticket revenue, lower costs and greater customer satisfaction.

Map 1. Western Ave Corridor Chicago



Economic Risks in the Proposed Union Pacific-Norfolk Southern Merger

Overview:
The railroad industry has a highly visible record of being unable to manage the merger process without a substantial service meltdown. Typically, the managerial hubris that drives the merger initiative also leaves management blind to the importance of a focus on the details, warnings of potential trouble spots and the need to provide sufficient resources to overcome merger challenges. Recent events at CSX, where an activist investor, Ancora, forced the ouster of a customer focused CEO replacing him with one with merger experience clearly shows that Wall Street is still focused on short-term financial results. In summary, we have clearly seen this movie before.

Financial Market Realities and Risks: A major risk is if Canadian National provokes a proxy fight with counter bids raising the cost of the merger leaving less funding for capacity investments to smooth the merger transition.

Network Realities:
While there is much discussion around the benefits of a transcontinental railroad, such a company will still be limited by its tracks. Unlike "go everywhere" trucks, a transcontinental railroad with not offer dock-to-dock service for most shippers. Substantial traffic will still be interchanged – to short lines, regional railroads and between the remaining class 1 railroads.

Because of this, the temptation for a newly merged transcontinental railroad will be to focus on transcon point-to-point traffic, where it can offer one railroad dock-to-dock service. This focus will maximize revenue in the short term, but leave interchange traffic, the majority of traffic, unreliable and any benefits will be invisible to many shippers. As a result, there will be a near-term spike in volume before traffic growth and mode share will resume their long-term decline.

The past is prologue. Both NS and UP offer single line service in several 750 – 1,000 mile north-south corridors (I-5, I-35, I-55, I-75 and I-95) yet their market penetration is modest given the volume of trucks on these Interstates. Given this performance the promises of great traffic growth in the Midwest Watershed area tend to ring hollow.

Business as Usual:
Given the pressure we saw from the activist investor Ancora in the CSX case, there is no guarantee that Wall Street won't quickly pivot return on investment (ROI) priority. The Operating Ratio will continue to be a priority. As a result, the newly merged railroad will focus on the most profitable of the new traffic maximizing yield rather than traffic growth. Also, there will be limited initiatives to attract traffic in the Midwest Watershed area.

The priority for ROI will put pressure on cost containment. So, capacity improvements will be postponed, hoping local management and operating employees can make it work. Just as with Precision Scheduled Railroad (PSR), management will wait and see what fails first and then adding capacity only when service failures risk gridlock. Finally, there will be pressure to keep crew base numbers tight, accepting delays to trains that result from recrewing.

Negative Impacts on the Public:
The "wait and see what fails" investment strategy will limit investments to offset the mitigation of negative impacts of the merger and past railroad operational changes.

If UP succeeds in holding concessions to a minimum – limited or no expansion of reciprocal switching, with Bottleneck Rates and paper barriers still in place – this will reduce rail competition which will mean fewer diversions of traffic from trucks. Also reducing rail competition is if there are limited or no trackage rights concessions for the CN, CPKCS, BNSF and CSX.

Finally, limited capacity investments and merger meltdown will result in Amtrak on-time performance in the single digits, reducing ridership, ticket revenue and increasing costs and reducing Amtrak's financial performance.

Previous Page

Start Over

Next Page

Link Union Station: Transforming Passenger Rail in Los Angeles

Brian Yanity

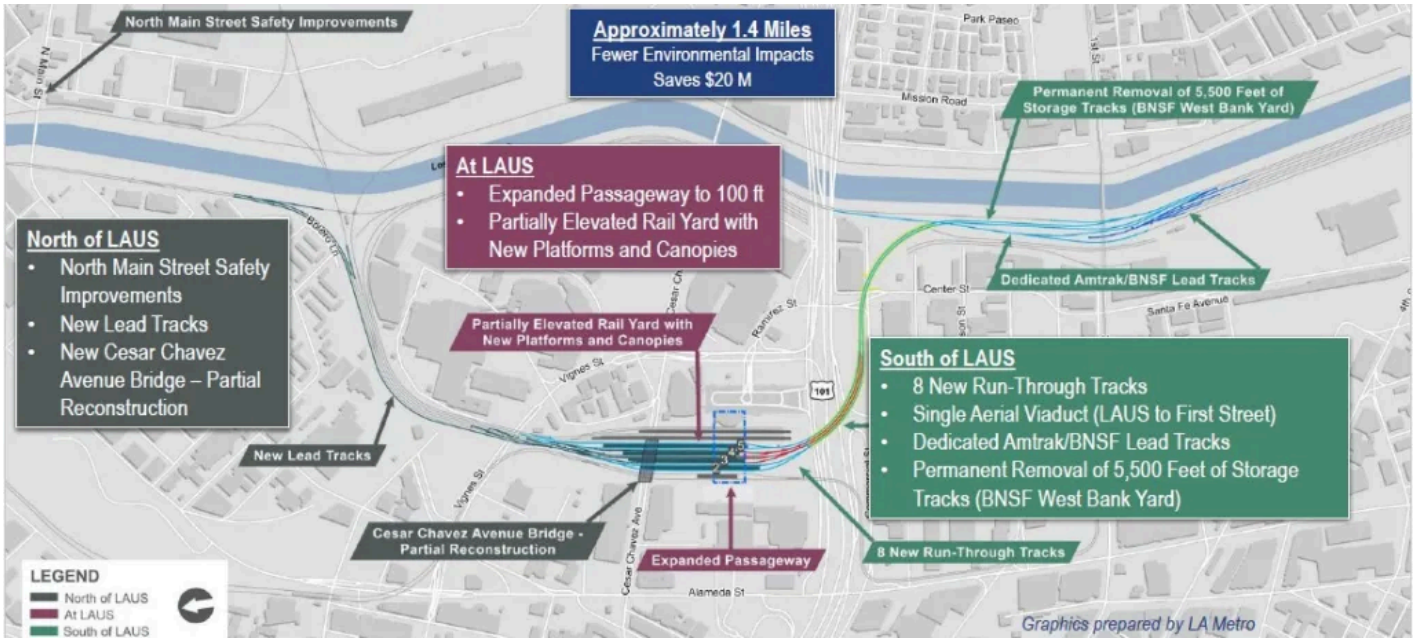
Los Angeles Union Station (LAUS) is a major transportation hub for Southern California, a region with a total population of 20 million. It is the busiest passenger rail hub in the Western United States.

LA Union Station (LAUS), originally known as Los Angeles Union Passenger Terminal, opened in 1939 as a joint venture between the Southern Pacific, Union Pacific, and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroads. The station replaced and consolidated the local terminals of the three railroads, as well as providing a new hub for Pacific Electric interurban, Los Angeles Railway streetcar and local bus lines. The chosen site at Los Angeles Plaza (across the street from El Pueblo de Los Angeles- the oldest section of the city) unfortunately required demolition of most of the city's original Chinatown. Residents and businesses displaced were relocated to the present Chinatown location just north of Union Station. The grand station quickly became a key hub and icon of Los Angeles, as described by the station's official website:

> The Station was designed by the father-and-son architect team of John and Donald Parkinson with an innovative blend of Spanish Colonial, Mission Revival and Art Deco [Streamline Moderne] architecture now commonly referred to as Mission Moderne. The stunning facility was completed in 1939 for a reported $11 million and opened with a lavish, star-studded, three-day celebration attended by a half million Angelenos.
>
> Within just a few years of opening, Union Station transformed into a bustling 24-hour, seven-day-a-week operation with as many as 100 troop trains carrying tens of thousands of servicemen through the terminal every day during World War II.
>
> By the 1950s Americans favored cars and planes to the rails, and there were fewer passengers throughout the Station, but it remained a vital part of LA's transportation scene for decades. Union Station was designated Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument No. 101 in 1972 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places and California Register of Historical Resources in 1980.
>
> In the eight-plus decades since its opening, Union Station has captured the spirit and soul of Los Angeles and has emerged as a vital portal to the promise of the California dream and a vibrant destination for arts and culture.
>
> LAUS is the only Amtrak station to have the distinction of hosting the Academy Awards, in 2021. The elegant station has made Hollywood cameos in many movies, TV shows, music videos and commercials over the years.

In FY2024, LAUS saw just over 1 million Amtrak passengers and about 2 million on Metrolink, or 3 million in total. This works out to be an average of over 8,200 'mainline' riders per day, down from a pre-pandemic peak of around 12,000. In FY2024, Metrolink's average weekday ridership at LAUS was 6,310. Amtrak runs 12 *Pacific Surfliners* [13 expected by end of 2025] between LA and San Diego (plus north of LA, 3 daily trains ending in Goleta and 2 per day to San Luis Obispo) and is the termination/origination point of three long distance routes: the *Coast Starlight*, *Southwest Chief* and *Sunset Limited*. Six of Metrolink's eight regional lines currently terminate at LAUS. Direct connections at LAUS between multiple modes of public transportation have steadily improved in recent years. These include three LA Metro rail lines, the J bus rapid transit line, along with local, regional and intercity bus routes of multiple operators. In FY2025, LAUS saw an average weekday total of 13,989 LA Metro rail transit riders (on the A, B, and D lines), and 555 J line BRT riders.

Since Los Angeles Union Station opened in 1939, it always has been a stub-end station for mainline regional, intercity and long-distance trains, which all have to enter the station in one direction, and then have to reverse to get out. This has always been the station's primary constraint, capping its capacity at about 180 trains per day. The Link Union Station (US) project aims to fix this. The current owner of Union Station, Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro) is the lead agency on the run-through track project.



LA Metro's 'Build Alternative Design Option' for Link Union Station with 8 run-through tracks (2025 Supplemental EIR)

The Link US project's centerpiece is a set of new run-through tracks, built south from the station on a multitrack bridge structure over the 101 freeway, joining the existing north-south tracks along the LA River southeast of the station. LA Metro is currently considering alternatives where eight or ten existing platform tracks will be extended southwards, merging into a viaduct over the 101 that would carry a minimum of four tracks. The run-through tracks will increase Union Station capacity (from 180 to 278 trains daily, a more than 50% increase) and reduce train dwell times (from twenty to five minutes). Through-running will unlock many new single-seat ride possibilities, including new Metrolink through service directly connecting Ventura County and San Fernando Valley with Orange County, or a new Amtrak *Pacific Surfliner* service going north of LA to Santa Clarita, along the route of Metrolink's Antelope Valley Line. California High Speed Rail service from

Northern California is expected to arrive sometime in the later 2030s. While the largest single feature of the Link US project will be the eight or ten new run-through tracks, other components of the project include upgraded platforms and station amenities, with a wider and more spacious passenger concourse and walkways.

To say that run-through tracks at LA Union Station are long overdue is an understatement, as it should have been a run-through station from the start. The project will create enormous benefits for Metrolink, Amtrak, and future HSR riders, but also for the mobility of Los Angeles and Southern California as a whole. It will improve everything about passenger rail transportation in the whole region. As described in a comment letter to the above-mentioned October 2025 LA Metro board meeting by Adriana Rizzo of Californians for Electric Rail:

> "Through-running at Union Station, which LinkUS accomplishes, will bring LA up to international standards as befits a true world city LinkUS is essential for high-speed rail to reach Anaheim, and timely delivery of this project will speed up the arrival of HSR to LA.
>
> …These service benefits will unlock more Metrolink and Metro ridership alike, and reduce traffic and pollution throughout the region.
>
> LinkUS is a project of regional importance that will transform transportation not just in the city of Los Angeles, but throughout Southern California and the Metrolink system. Through-running takes Metrolink one step closer to an international, S-Bahn-style transit system that efficiently serves urban and regional riders alike with fast, frequent, seamless service."

As described by Joe Linton in an October 17, 2025 article in Streetsblog LA:

> The mega-project includes building new bridge structures over and along the 101 Freeway and extensively retooling of the historic station – all while keeping trains running. Early estimates anticipated Link US would cost around $3 billion; now just the initial phase (mainly extending tracks over the 101) could cost that much.
>
> Union Station run-through tracks are a critically important upgrade that will greatly expand rail capacity. Many rail travelers – and probably all rail-geeks – understand this, but the benefits are insider-y enough, that there is no serious Link US project champion on the Metro board. Nobody at Metro opposes it, but it's not quite a top priority for anyone.
>
> For at least a decade, the Link US project has proceeded in fits and starts. The project underwent a community input process that spent a bit too long considering some ill-advised alternatives. In 2019 the Metro board approved what appeared to be final project designs and environmental studies. Even at that time, the board was trimming the overall Link US plan to try to arrive at an initial phase that would proceed with funds already secured.
>
> But construction costs still exceeded funding at hand, throwing the project into limbo – and out of contention for a possible pre-2028 Olympics opening.

The LinkUS project has a long history, proceeding off and on over the past quarter century. The first environmental approvals, for an earlier version of the run-through tracks design, happened way back in 2005. LA Metro began preliminary engineering for the project in 2014, and a recommended alternative configuration was approved in 2017. In 2019, the LA Metro board approved the Final Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the what was then thought to be the final design of the Link US run-through tracks and improvements. The preferred Build Alternative had ten run-through tracks. Even by 2019, the project had been scaled down somewhat from the original vision to reduce costs.

Pre-construction activities, including final design and engineering under a Construction Management/General Contractor (CMGC) delivery process and acquisition/demolition of existing buildings south of the station across the 101 freeway, were approved in 2022. Meanwhile, further cost-cutting (value engineering) design changes were made to evaluate an alternative, eight run-through tracks resulting in a Supplemental EIR (SEIR) process. The design modifications made to the LinkUS 2019 Final EIR design, were defined by the 2025 SEIR as the Build Alternative Design Option 8-track project variant. As described by the California High Speed Rail Authority November 20, 2025 board meeting memo, this option consisted of the following design reductions in project scope compared to the 10-track preferred Build Alternative:

- Vignes Street Bridge – No reconstruction required versus full reconstruction
- Cesar Chavez Bridge – Partial reconstruction versus full reconstruction
- Partially Elevated Rail Yard – 9 to 12-foot raise versus 15-foot raise
- Fewer Raised Platforms – 4 platforms raised versus 6 platforms raised
- Reduced Extent of Concourse-Related Improvements – 100-foot wide Expanded Passageway versus 140-foot wide Expanded Passageway; Removal of West Plaza and Grand Canopy Design Option.
- Fewer Run-Through Tracks on Single Aerial Viaduct from LAUS to West Bank/LA River – 8 run-through tracks versus 10 run-through tracks from LAUS to the 101-viaduct, a Narrower structure over US-101, four run-through tracks (instead of six) at the southern edge of the viaduct, two HSR/regional rail shared run-through tracks (instead of four run-through tracks with two exclusive to HSR) from the southern edge of the viaduct to the northern edge of the Los Angeles to Anaheim HSR project section, and an all viaduct structure versus combination of bridges and embankments
- Less construction activity with reduced environmental impacts
- Reduction of cost

According to the Build Alternative Design Option, a viaduct with two through-tracks will be built in Phase A of the project (expected to be completed in 2031) with the remaining six built during Phase B (opening date TBD). However, the ten-track Build Alternative is not completely off the table, if enough funding could be found for it in the years ahead.

Nearly $1 billion has been secured for the project, out of a total estimated cost of $3 billion for Phase A of the project. In 2022, LinkUS secured $423 million from California High Speed Rail Authority (CHSRA), from (2008) Proposition 1A bond funds, with an additional $527 million from state and local sources. Like most infrastructure projects in recent years, cost estimates for LinkUS have steadily increased.

BNSF Malabar Yard in Vernon

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to the project is a small BNSF freight yard located in the city of Vernon, three miles away from Union Station itself. The new Link US run-through tracks joining the

existing north-south tracks along the LA River will require acquisition and dismantling of BNSF's West Bank Yard, which is used to assemble freight trains and store rail cars. LA Metro worked with BNSF to look for other nearby locations to replace the West Bank Yard storage and staging tracks. After evaluating several alternatives along the BNSF mainline southeast of downtown LA, BNSF and LA Metro settled on a reconfiguration of the existing BNSF Malabar Yard in Vernon as the preferred 'off-site mitigation' for the Link US project.

The plans call for closure of a grade crossing at 49th Street, and a new 1,000'-long connector track between two existing track segments along 46th Street. This new track connection will require a new grade crossing at Seville Avenue and acquisition/demolition of parts of existing industrial properties. Project impact-mitigation measures proposed to the city of Vernon include train and traffic safety features, 25 new bus shelters, 8 improved crosswalks, and rail crossing 'quiet zone' infrastructure.

However, the City of Vernon and businesses adjacent to the Malabar Yard have voiced opposition to these plans. Vernon is disputing LA Metro's claims that the proposed changes at Malabar Yard will result in fewer trains per day blocking street at-grade crossings. The neighborhood (as is most of the City of Vernon) is an industrial area, densely packed with existing businesses.



Proposed changes to BNSF Malabar Yard in the city of Vernon

The City of Vernon has refused to permit these changes to Malabar Yard when BNSF proposed them as far back as 2006, citing impacts on street traffic, air quality and adjacent businesses. According to the city, BNSF has declined to commit in writing to city of Vernon to a plan for reduced freight train activity which blocks Vernon streets. The City of Vernon has also threatened to sue LA Metro under the Californian Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), despite stating that it strongly supports the LinkUS project itself. As described by Joe Linton in Streetsblog LA, "It's not clear where this all goes. Perhaps, Metro leadership can pull together an arrangement that satisfies BNSF and Vernon,

both of which have reputations of being hard to work with. One hopes the arrangement won't mean further cost increases or further delays for this essential project."

Approval of environmental documents clears way for construction starting in early 2026

At the LA Metro board meeting on October 23, 2025, two agenda items on Link Union Station passed unanimously by all eight board members present. One (2025-0805) was certification of the project's Final Final SEIR. The other motion (2025-0931) committed LA Metro "to continue to work towards resolution of priority outstanding issues with the City of Vernon and the BNSF Railroad".

There were over 60 total commenters- about half of whom associated with City of Vernon, who were opposed to/expressed concerns about the BNSF Malabar yard changes proposed as part of Link US project mitigation. Vernon stakeholders were particularly concerned about trains blocking street traffic and business activity, along with emissions from locomotives. The other half of the public commenters were project supporters, including many from construction unions along with public transportation and rail advocates, the Sierra Club Angeles Chapter, the LA Chamber of Commerce, and a handful of public officials.

LA Metro still needs to negotiate a deal with BNSF and the City of Vernon. At the October board meeting, Chair Fernando Dutra and board members including Aja Najarian and Tim Sandoval emphasized the critical importance of the project and the urgency of certifying the EIR, while acknowledging City of Vernon's concerns. The BNSF Malabar yard redesign is in its early phases, so LA Metro is confident that those concerns will be worked out. LA Metro will be seeking state funds for the Malabar Yard project.

One last approval of the revised project scope/SEIR is needed, by CHSRA, which is funding a significant portion of the project. Pursuant to a 2019 MOU between the State of California and the Federal Railroad Administration that was renewed in 2024, CHSRA is responsible for the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) through 2034 for the Link US Project. CHSRA is now preparing to issue the Final Environmental Impact Statement/Record-of-Decision under NEPA, which final approvals by LA Metro and the CHSRA CEO expected in December 2025.

In August 2025, FlatironDragos was chosen as the prime contractor for pre-construction activities. Demolition of industrial buildings in the footprint of the elevated run-through tracks was completed in 2025. Early works, including pre-construction and utility relocation, will begin in 2026. Construction of the substantial structures of the project is slated to begin in 2027.

Rediscovering Orange County, One Station at a Time

David Peter Alan, Railway Age Contributing Editor

This article originally appeared in Culture OC on October 13, 2025.
We thank Culture OC for their generous permission to republish this article!

This introductory story launches Culture OC's new series exploring Metrolink's Orange County Line – and what makes each stop a destination.



The Metrolink tracks at the station in Buena Park. Photo by Joel Beers, Culture OC

As Metrolink pivots from commuter service to cultural connector, its Orange County Line offers a new way to experience the region – not just as a way through it, but as a way into it. Over the next several weeks, Culture OC will explore what makes each stop along this historic route worth visiting, from lively downtowns to hidden corners rich in character.

A Little Background

As 2019 wound down, Metrolink's Orange County Line – opened in 1994 with five O.C. stops along the Los Angeles-to-Oceanside route – was one of the two busiest lines on the nation's eighth-largest commuter rail system.

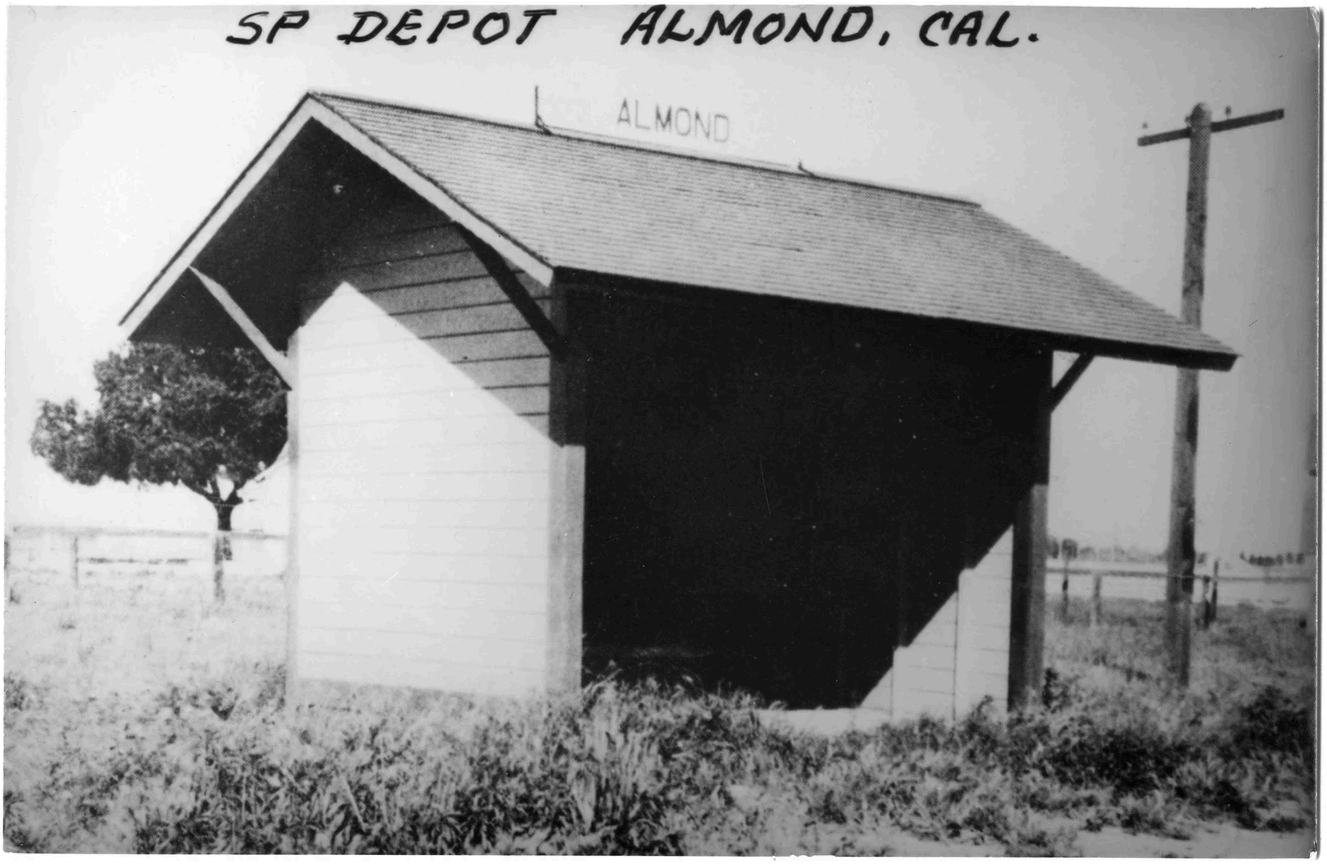
Average weekday ridership topped 10,000, and the Orange County portion had expanded to 11 stations, with Fullerton, Irvine, and Tustin ranking among the busiest of the system's 68 stops.
Then the pandemic hit. Between April and June 2020, average weekday ridership plummeted to 734. Weekend ridership, which had hovered around 50,000 for the two three-month quarters pre-pandemic, cratered to just 6,500.

The climb back has been slow. This year, average daily ridership finally crept past 5,000, still less than half its 2019 level. But weekend ridership tells a different story: it rebounded far faster, quadrupling to 25,000 by mid-2021 and nearly reaching 50,000 over the same period in 2022.

That pattern played out systemwide. Fewer commuters were riding during the week, but plenty of people were hopping aboard on weekends.

Metrolink took notice. In response, it began reimagining itself as a regional rail network rather than a commuter line. In October 2024, it launched the largest expansion in its history: adding more midday and late-night trains, boosting weekend service, improving transfers between its seven lines, and standardizing departures to leave at regular intervals past the hour. The goal: to make the system more useful for students, tourists and nontraditional workers – and to get riders thinking of its stations not just as launchpads, but as destinations themselves, gateways to the communities surrounding them.

No line embodies that shift more than the Orange County Line, which added seven weekday trains, including one that now departs Los Angeles' Union Station at 10 p.m.



The first passenger stop on the first railroad to nose its way into what would eventually be Orange County, the Southern Pacific in 1874, was a tiny passenger shelter originally named Almond, located in present-day

Buena Park where Orangethorpe Avenue crosses Dale Street.



Pacific Electric "Red Car" crossing Euclid Avenue in Garden Grove on way to Santa Ana. Photos courtesy of Orange County Archives.

Stations as Gateways

With the county now easier to traverse by rail – at least along a route that mostly traces the 5 Freeway – the question becomes: What's worth stopping for?

Over the coming weeks, Culture OC will explore just that. Each story will spotlight one or two stations: the architecturally striking (Santa Ana, Anaheim), those at the heart of lively downtowns (Fullerton, Orange), and ones where the gems can be more difficult to find. We'll look at history, design and neighborhood character – and how to get beyond the platforms, whether by foot, bus, or how to hop to spots like Disneyland, John Wayne Airport or the coast.

But what won't be included are many of the county's major arts or cultural landmarks, unless it's relaying how to get there via alternate transportation. That's because the Orange County Line follows the same route Amtrak inherited in 1971 – the old Santa Fe Railroad Surf Line, completed in 1888 to link Los Angeles and San Diego. It entered present-day O.C. in what's now northwestern Buena Park, ran east to Fullerton, jiggled south to connect the county's first three incorporated cities (Anaheim, Orange, Santa Ana), then curved through the Irvine Ranch, Mission Viejo and Laguna Niguel before reaching San Juan Capistrano and exiting the county through San Clemente.

By the time Amtrak took over in 1971, most of those original stations were gone. But the survivors – Fullerton, Santa Ana, San Juan Capistrano, and the new ones built after the county began seriously thinking of joining Metrolink in the 1980s, all followed that same corridor, roughly paralleling Interstate 5.



Though today's passenger rail service in Orange County is mainly limited to the Interstate 5 corridor, 100 years ago, lines connected most communities in the western part of the county. In 1925, Pacific Electric ran on approximately 1,000 miles of track in Southern California. A station in what would become the city of Stanton opened in 1905 along the Los Angeles to Santa Route, and a second line connected it to Huntington Beach to the South.



By 1920, when this photo was taken in Santa Ana on West Fourth Street, Pacific Electric red cars covered more than 1,000 miles in Southern California, with more than 70 stops in Orange County. By 1950, regular passenger service on its lined had ended. Photos courtesy of Orange County Archives.

100-Year-Old Template

In other words, the modern system retraces a path set more than a century ago with every O.C. station sitting beside or east of the 5, not touching the coast until San Clemente. The Sante Fe route wasn't the only passenger line in the county; but it's the one that survived. As late as 1930, railways traversed most of the county, connecting stations from Seal Beach to Balboa and Cypress to Huntington Beach. They fueled the growth of those communities as well as future cities like Westminster and Costa Mesa.

But passenger service began to decline in the 1930s and had all but disappeared by the time of Orange County's post-World War II boom. Cars, highways and freeways rendered proximity to rail irrelevant; houses, college campuses, amusement parks and theaters could be built or formed miles from any railroad stop.

The result: Most of the county's cultural treasures, particularly those built or formed after 1950, lie far from the tracks.

So, while Metrolink's OC Line stations are convenient if you're bound for destinations that are on the route, like Angel Stadium, the Grove of Anaheim, Old Towne Orange and the Hilbert Museum, downtown San Juan Capistrano or Casa Romantica. But head west of the 5, and you'll need alternate transportation or a sturdy pair of shoes. The Segerstrom Center and South Coast Repertory are 6 miles from the nearest station; the Muzeo, 4; the Irvine Barclay, 5 to 6; Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm, 3 to 6; Soka Performing Arts Center, 5 to 7; Little Saigon, 7; Little Arabia, 10.

And the beaches? Apart from San Clemente, none are within four miles of a station. Laguna Beach is 10 miles away, Newport 12, Huntington Beach 15.



The Pacific Electric Railway, or "red cars" as they were commonly known, ran trolley lines in the first half of the 20th century that carried passengers through most of the communities that comprise present-day Orange County, including a coastal route that ran through Huntington Beach, as this photo from 1949 illustrates. Photo by Bob McVay, Tom Gildersleeve Collection

Previous Page

Sure, there are buses that will, eventually, get be, as well as rideshare if you enjoy surge pricing for sport, but isn't the whole point of the train to avoid cars altogether?

Start Over

Fortunately, at most of the 11 local stations on the OC Line, there are things worth seeing or doing within a reasonable walking distance. Some, like Anaheim re architectural showpieces. Others anchor lively downtowns filled with restaurants, nightlife, and groovy shops. And there are a few others that might require a bit more digging to uncover what makes them interesting.

Next Page

But you can look at this series as a shovel to help you unearth the nuggets when you step off the train. And the first ground we'll hit, next week, will be the Buena Park Metrolink Station. It's the first local stop on the OC Line and is located in the same city where the first passenger train ever stopped in present-day Orange County – and one where no train would stop for some 80 years.

The Success of the NYC Congestion Relief Program



NYC'S CONGESTION RELIEF PROGRAM: THE FIRST EIGHT MONTHS



In just eight months, New York's first-in-the-nation Congestion Relief Program has already proven to be a transformative success.

There are fewer cars on the road, buses are running faster, air quality is improving citywide, and our streets are safer. Traffic injuries are down, transit ridership is up, and school buses and emergency vehicles are moving more reliably. Businesses in the CRZ are experiencing greater foot traffic and stronger sales, while the program has already raised hundreds of millions of dollars to modernize subways, expand accessibility, and support good jobs.

By easing gridlock and reinvesting in transit, the program is making the city more livable, sustainable, and economically resilient.

CONGESTION PRICING NOW

three cairns group

Fewer Vehicles, Less Congestion

- Since launching on January 5, 17.6 million fewer vehicles have entered the congestion relief zone (CRZ) than in 2024.
- Daily entries into the CRZ are down 12%—about 87,000 fewer vehicles per day.
- Traffic delays are down 25% inside the CRZ and down 9% region-wide, including parts of New Jersey, from January to April 2025 compared to the same period in 2024.

Faster Trips and Fewer Delays

- Commuters are saving as much as 21 minutes on their trips throughout the region.
- Bus speeds have increased within the CRZ, with some routes increasing by as much as 25%.
- School buses are moving 5% faster compared to last year, and are on time 72% of the time, up from 58% last year.
- Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North On-Time Performance have consistently been at or near 97% in 2025.
- MTA bus routes through the Lincoln Tunnel are 10% faster on average compared to before congestion relief.



Better transit experience now and in the future

- *The MTA has also signed contracts to begin the extension of the Second Avenue Subway*

- Subway ridership is up 9% year-over-year, with bus ridership up 13%. Regional rail also saw an increase in riders, with the Long Island Rail Road up 10% and Metro-North up 7%.

Safer, quieter streets

- Vehicle accidents and injuries are down by nearly 15%.
- As of July, pedestrian fatalities on NYC streets are at historic lows, matching levels last seen in 2018.
- Honking and vehicle noise complaints to 311 are down by 45% in 2025.

particle pollution (PM2.5) dropped or stayed steady at nearly every monitoring site.

- Contrary to early forecasts, PM2.5 levels declined in areas like the South Bronx and Staten Island, thanks in part to reduced traffic and mitigation efforts.
- While it's still early, these results are a strong sign that congestion relief is working as intended—reducing pollution without pushing it elsewhere—and laying the groundwork for cleaner, healthier neighborhoods citywide.

Increased foot traffic and economic activity

- Foot traffic in Manhattan surpassed pre-pandemic levels in August.
- Business district pedestrian activity within the CRZ was up 8.4% in May 2025 compared to 2024. This was higher than the 2.7% growth outside of the CRZ.
- Business activity in the CRZ is also up, including:
  - *Broadway's largest season resulted in $1.9 billion in ticket sales*
  - *Retail sales are on track to be up $900 million in 2025 compared to 2024*
  - *Hotel occupancy was 87% in April 2025 compared to 85% in April 2024*
- More people are going to work within the CRZ compared to 2024, with a 6.7% increase in daily workers in Lower Manhattan as of February.

Sources

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- Regional Plan Association. (n.d.). *Congestion pricing: Getting around faster all around*. RPA. [Link]
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CONGESTION PRICING NOW

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An Epitaph for the NorthStar

Dennis Larson and Andrew Selden

(Northstar is the Minneapolis based commuter rail service that is about to cease operations. Metrolink made many of the same mistakes in its early years and only in the last few years has it embraced connectivity and through services – true Regional rail. Unfortunately I cannot provide a map of the original MinnARP proposal so you'll have to get out your atlas! P. Dyson)

On January 4, 2026 Met Council's attempt at rail commuter service, the Northstar train, will make its last run. Lots of time, effort, and money went into bringing Northstar to the northern suburbs, but not enough creative thought. The result is huge opportunity forfeited to politics and bureaucratic ineptitude.

Northstar service began in 2009, after more than 15 years of mostly political development efforts, the usual environmental studies, and colossal blunders by Met Council that doomed the project from the start.

The original concept that became Northstar appeared in a 1989 White Paper by MinnARP based on a conceptual engineering study (by MinnARP and Nordberg-Herzog Associates) that asked: "If one were to use rail to supplement the region's sometimes over-taxed freeway network, what would that look like?"

The answer was essentially a new concept at the time for rail passenger service that was more than a commuter train, but less than an intercity service, which was named "Regional Rail." The proposed initial corridor was Hastings to Elk River, along the same route used by Amtrak's *Empire Builder*. The route would have trains running—like metro freeways—*across* the metro area and thus serving passengers going long or short distances to and from any points on or near the stations. Buses and park-and-rides would feed the trains. The route would serve both downtowns (St. Paul and Minneapolis), many suburban and inner city stops (e.g., Grand Avenue in St. Paul) AND both campuses of the U of M via a stop under the Intercampus Busway at St. Anthony Junction. That stop was like adding a third city on the route, with a population of 75,000 people.



Trains would run all day—hourly or more in rush hours and every hour (or two) at other times. That way, trains could serve all types of travel need from full-day commuting to special events to shopping and doctor appointments and everything else that people do in cars using the freeways. Almost no one would ride between end points, but neither would the trains be useful only to people making full-day commutation trips to only one of the area's central business districts.

Hastings and Elk River have small yards that could house the trains and service facilities. And, from there, trains could easily start a trip by backtracking a modest distance to obvious outermost service points at Red Wing and Becker, or even St. Cloud.

The White Paper observed that while Hastings to Elk River was the most logical initial corridor, later expansions using existing main line railroads could be developed at modest cost along other corridors, including Wayzata or Waverly to Hudson (WI), Chaska to Farmington, and Mankato-St. Paul-Minneapolis, creating a full network of travel possibilities—just as did the freeways. EACH of these routes also would serve both major downtowns, both campuses of the U of M at the St. Anthony Junction site, and a large number of online communities, in and out of the urban core, just like freeway on-and-off ramps do.

But the Northstar project, even when ardently supported by Anoka County political leaders and Gov. Ventura, was doomed from the start because of planning failures, large and small, that limited Northstar to being not a widely-useful regional service but a mere commuter train to Minneapolis—a one-trick pony, a tool designed for just one job, and they didn't even get that part right. When the Covid epidemic erupted in 2020, and people from Anoka County largely stopped commuting to downtown Minneapolis, and Northstar could not perform any other service for area travelers, ridership plummeted and by 2025 had rebounded only to about a third of its peak level.



Met Council, with the creative vision of a brick, learned nothing about the post-Covid commuter rail adaptations made in other cities that quickly adapted older commuter trains into services that

began to look a lot like Regional Rail—running all day and *across* a metro region, not just into downtown in rush hours and quit.

After Covid, Metro Transit—once and always a bus operator—made no attempt to evolve Northstar, and even as ridership continued to grow on the reduced commuter service it offered, pulled the plug and decided to convert Northstar back into a conventional bus route.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

Like all train wrecks, more than one thing caused this colossal failure. Here are some of them.

Misunderstanding Rail Mobility.

Northstar would have been a very different and vastly more productive service if it had mimicked the freeways, by running across the metro area, and running all day. Met Council missed that entirely, and focused instead on getting to St. Cloud. There's nothing wrong with pushing a few trains a day 40 miles farther west to access St. Cloud. In 1990, MinnDOT estimated that 10,000 people a day commuted between the Twin Cities and St. Cloud (going both ways, too). But why prioritize going 40 miles west to tap a fraction of 10,000 travelers rather than going 10 miles east to tap a population of 500,000 in St. Paul and its surrounding areas?

And in a classic demonstration of bureaucrats managing someone else's capital assets, Metro Transit parked its valuable Northstar trainsets at the Target Field station all day between rush hours, instead of keeping them working to serve area travelers. These costly mobility machines spent far more time parked every day than running.

Using Metro Transit as the operator.

Metro Transit is primarily an urban bus system and it applied its expertise in city buses to Northstar. Rail service is fundamentally different from bus service. It largely caters to a different demographic, and it is costly to operate, so must work very hard to develop and retain patronage. Metro Transit did none of that and even made a mess out of the LRT system. Metro Transit has demonstrated that it didn't understand trains or *regional* mobility needs.

Paying little interest in past traffic patterns.

The first mistake was making Fridley a stop. A relative handful of people used bus transit from Fridley, and after spending millions making Fridley a Northstar stop it produced the same result. The alternative was Foley Boulevard. Transit patronage was so heavy there that a two-story parking ramp/park-and-ride was built to get cars off the street and their drivers into buses. Despite the Northstar route running within feet of the park-and-ride, Northstar skipped this lucrative potential stop.

Comfortable station stops.

Metra of Chicago has heated shelters for its train stops while Metro Transit has something resembling a bus stop, cold with some shelter from the wind. Despite the inherent reliability of train schedules, passengers need better shelter in Minnesota's winters if one is serious about attracting drivers out of their cars.



Pricing.

When Northstar began in 2009, Metro Transit pricing made it the most expensive commuter train service in the country (in price per mile terms). That suppressed usage during the critical early trial phase when potential customers try out a new service. Although prices were later reduced, it took Northstar years to recover.

The traffic base.

Northstar terminates in downtown Minneapolis and thus depends on full-day, five-day-a-week office workers. With people working from home after 2020, a huge amount of patronage vanished. Northstar should have served more stops beyond downtown at both ends of the line. MinnDOT has long known that a majority of cars approaching downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul on area freeways are actually headed for destinations *beyond* the downtowns. (That's why the one lane connecting I-394 to I-94 eastbound is always such a colossal mess.) Northstar couldn't serve that majority of travelers because it never ran beyond downtown Minneapolis.

No thinking outside the box.

Something like a quiet car without the bright lights also was requested by patrons. The availability of hot coffee and donuts would be something to look forward to every morning. Few bus routes connected with Northstar Trains. Rather than abandoning tens of millions of dollars investment there might be a better option by combining bus and train service. Bus service could feed Northstar and fill in for the times Northstar doesn't operate. But Metro Transit applied no entrepreneurial thinking to Northstar.

It didn't have to end this way, and we are confident that low-information legislators and urban planners will learn all the wrong lessons from the Northstar experience. Relying on the "Covid" excuse, rather than understanding what Northstar might—and could—have been, we believe that it will be a very long time before another opportunity to use Regional Rail will arise in Minnesota. Minnesota's taxpayers and regional travelers are the ultimate losers.

An Update on Passenger Rail in Arizona

Todd Liebman



I want to be as clear as I can; the time for passenger rail is here, and we are on the verge of a renaissance in passenger rail. Five years ago, frequencies of the long-distance trains had been cut, dining car service was curtailed, proposals to substitute a bus in the middle of the Southwest Chief route were being bandied about, and the Tucson to Phoenix Sun Corridor study was sitting on a shelf. Today, Amtrak is smashing ridership and revenue records, the long distance trains are running daily except for two which have traditionally been three days per week, full dinning service is back on most western long distance trains and many eastern trains, the Tucson to Phoenix corridor is advancing to the second round of the Corridor ID program, and Amtrak is committed to daily service on the Sunset Limited through Benson, Tucson, Maricopa and Yuma. Make no mistake; this is significant.

As President of All Aboard Arizona and Vice Chair of the Rail Passengers Association, I have had a catbirds seat to this progress which is directly due to two things; the inherent superiority of rail as a mode of passenger transport in so many areas; and, determined advocacy by you and the advocacy community.

We were successful in hosting the national Rail Nation Conference in Tucson last November. At that conference, All Aboard Arizona rolled out a vision for an interconnected Arizona. The proposal views rail passenger stations across the state as transportation hubs with easy access to feeder services. To this end, All Aboard Arizona has built strong partnerships with Metropolitan Planning Organizations in Arizona to bring passenger rail to the forefront and begin working on a plan to seamlessly link all of Arizona. This plan leverages already existing community assets and local transportation services with station improvements and nests them with already existing rail passenger plans to envision a new way to compliment Arizona's transportation mix. For example, with a daily Sunset back through Phoenix and the additional services planned by the Federal Railroad Administration's Long-Distance Study, Arizona can conceivably be comprehensively linked by rail passenger services, and in many cases, two daily frequencies. This is a game changer.

Of course, our crown jewel is the Sun Corridor which is proposed to run from Buckeye in the North to Tucson International Airport in the South. This service will directly link three major airports; Sky Harbor in Phoenix, Mesa Gateway Airport and Tucson International. This corridor design is brilliant because it takes passengers through Phoenix to Buckeye, recognizing the need to go through

downtown to the growing west side of Phoenix and goes south through downtown Tucson to the airport. This will conveniently create a hub at Tucson International that can serve nearby communities including southeast Arizona and cities like Sierra Vista, Tombstone, Bisbee and Douglas as well as the southern cities of Sahuarita, Green Valley and Nogales. With Mexico's passenger rail improvements, it is entirely possible that connections to the Mexican rail system will be possible in Nogales.

The Sun Corridor also conveniently serves the two largest state universities which are both conveniently linked to the corridor by light rail in Phoenix and streetcar in Tucson. We can begin to see an Arizona lifestyle where people in Phoenix can head down to Tucson for a day or weekend, perhaps bike the loop, have dinner and return. People in Tucson can run up to Phoenix and take in a Diamondback's game or spend the weekend. Families who don't drive will have mobility to visit family members or get to doctor's appointments without having to worry about scheduling expensive shuttles or arranging transportation.

Our conversations with offline communities indicate how important the Sun Corridor will be for their mobility and economic development. For example, passengers from Oro Valley can board a dedicated bus or shuttle in Oro Valley and catch the train at a new transportation hub at Marana and easily travel to points across Arizona. Having three airports to conveniently shop for fares from and then access easily by train will make life easier wherever you are traveling to. Of course, these trains are all part of the national Amtrak system that can take you across the country as well, and that, with expansions, is projected to serve 85% of America within a convenient catchment area.

Leadership in Washington can change, but the great news is that passenger rail has considerable, bi-partisan support. The current Amtrak Board is the first board in the history of the company that actually is represented of all passenger and regional interests and is comprised of people with expertise and understanding of passenger rail. This is huge because it imposes oversight on Amtrak to ensure the corporation is not overlooking important opportunities and is attuned to national interests. Early indications are that passenger rail may be alright despite tight budgets. It helps that Amtrak covers most of its costs from fares, well in excess of 90%. That means that a dollar invested in Amtrak returns nine times its value in return. That translates into major economic development throughout the country, improved facilities, more employment and more dynamic economic impact.

I recently had the opportunity to take Amtrak across the country from Arizona to the Upper Midwest to visit family. The Sunset Limited and Texas Eagle were on-time or early on the entire trip. The trains were beautiful, clean and well kept. The service was excellent and attentive. The meals on the Sunset were first rate where full dining has been restored. The Texas Eagle has the wonderful Sightseer Lounge car returned to service which was extremely popular among all the passengers. Across Illinois, we ran at 100 mph over long stretches where Federal and State of Illinois investment has improved that corridor. Many passengers were using the Eagle from points in Illinois to Chicago and they absolutely loved the Sightseer Lounge and its panoramic windows.

My trip continued on the Hiawatha Corridor between Chicago and Milwaukee, one of Amtrak's most successful routes with seven trips a day between Chicago and Milwaukee with a stop at Milwaukee's

Mitchell International Airport. The Hiawatha is an example of what the Sun Corridor can be. It is popular, convenient, and Milwaukee's beautiful, modern passenger station is linked by the streetcar to downtown destinations. I only walked a few blocks to pick up my rental car. But here's the deal; after relaxing on the train from Arizona to the Midwest, I was completely relaxed as opposed to that feeling after a long flight. It is hard to take a trip like that and not realize that rail is a wonderful option to have for mobility and for travel ease.

We're in a great place. Near term, we continue to work on maintaining the progress on the Sun Corridor, working with Amtrak to get the Sunset Limited daily and back through Phoenix, and get the Benson station improved with an ADA accessible platform. We need to continue to push Amtrak's order for new long-distance, now scheduled to go out in FY '26 (which begins October 1st), and a national equipment pool for all intercity passenger cars. Advocates are also pushing for a national passenger rail commission to oversee these efforts.

Mid-term, we continue to work on our Fund the Fifteen program. These are the fifteen new long distance routes proposed by the Federal Railroad Administration's Long Distance Study and which will have a major impact on Arizona by linking Tucson and Phoenix with points in western Arizona like Wickenburg and Parker to the San Francisco Bay Area and a new service that will link Phoenix to Flagstaff and then east to Albuquerque, Kansas City, Omaha, Sioux Falls and Minneapolis with easy connections to Chicago, St. Louis and points east. We always need to consider stable funding, and a national infrastructure bank is one proposal for accomplishing this. Tweaks to legislation like eliminating the non-federal match for the long-distance trains, and even state supported trains in corridors deemed essential to the national system, makes sense. Longer term, once we have reliable, intercity passenger rail in place, we can begin focusing on building and improving regional transit hubs, working with local businesses to build ridership, and enhancing the passenger experience on the new trains. We also need to think about how rail is structured in America and how we can ensure the mobility needs of America are addressed going forward. In other words, ensuring America has the railroads it needs and not just the railroads that return big profits for Wall Street.

Your support is vital. This progress would not have happened without organizations like All Aboard Arizona and Rail Passengers Association. Join and get involved in making improvements to mobility in America.

All Aboard Arizona will host our annual Passenger Rail Summit in the Spring of 2026. This is a great chance to meet with rail advocates from across the region and hear from nationally renowned speakers on these exciting programs, the progress being made and how to resolve the natural friction points that develop. We can promise a reasonable registration fee, exciting speakers and a fun time to collaborate and interact.

As always, if you have questions or want to provide input, feel free to reach out. I am always glad to talk about rail.

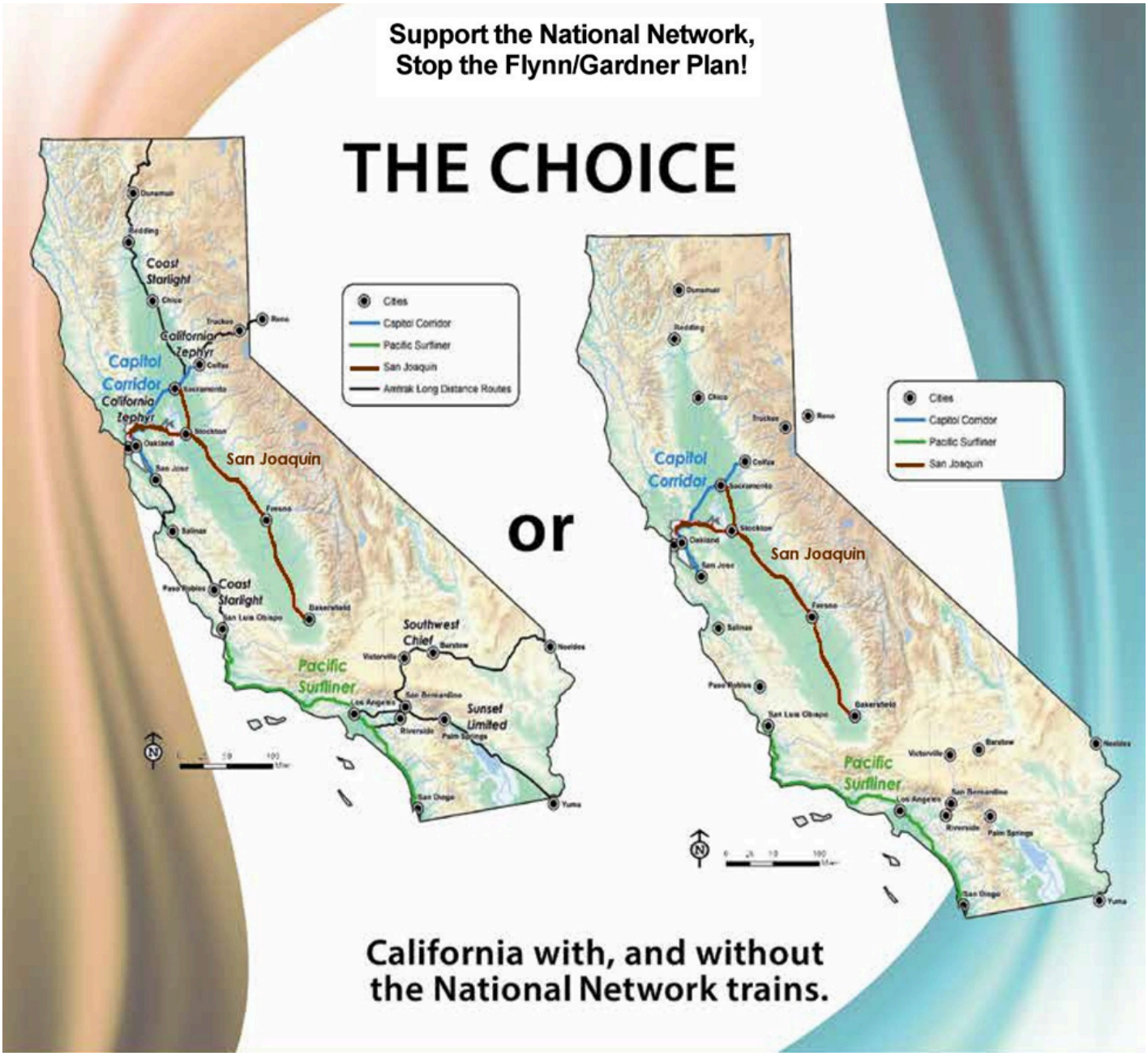
Todd Liebman
President, All Aboard Arizona

Vice Chair, Rail Passenger Association

from the rear platform

Paul Dyson

***Still* no car order for long-distance trains.**



It's always time to reprise this story. This map was published first in Steel Wheels in 2020, but it's actually a revised version from an earlier map published in 2018. The sad truth is it could have been used any time since the 1980s. The first Superliners were entered service in 1979 and over the next 17 years 479 were built, a fleet that was barely adequate to operate the existing

network. From 1996 to 2002 the concept was continued with the California car and the Surfliner, but after the last Surfliner the production line in Hornell NY went quiet. So, nothing has changed since I joined RailPAC in April 1980. It's all about rolling stock. We can participate in FRA planning sessions forever and a day but without trains it's just an intellectual exercise.

If the current government's policy for American industry is anything more than hot air one would expect to see the encouragement of rolling stock manufacturing. How about it, Mr. President? Job creation, steel consumption, skills development?

Chad Edison Moves On

Chad Edison, formerly Chief Deputy Secretary, Rail and Transit, California State Transportation Agency, has resigned to take up a position, Rail and Transit Practice Leader, with consulting firm Kimley Horn based in Sacramento. Chad issued the following statement:



Chad Edison (R) with Darren Kettle, Metrolink CEO, at the opening of Arrow service at Redlands, November 2022. (Photo: P. Dyson)

"I have been honored to serve for nearly twelve years at the California State Transportation Agency (joining 6 months after its founding), helping to advance rail and transit within California and partnering with a large number of our state's rail and transit agencies. I am so proud of all that we have accomplished together and cannot come close to writing a complete list of the many who have helped get the work done along the way. After my last day on Monday, November 17th, (2025) I look forward to sharing about my next chapter which will continue to allow me to help advance rail and transit within California and beyond. Thanks to all who have worked alongside me over these years."

I met Chad in 2013 just after he took up his leadership of rail and transit within the newly created Calsta agency. It's impossible not to be impressed by Chad's energy and depth of knowledge. I wondered at the time how long the enthusiasm and dynamism would last, and would it be sufficient to move the needle within the confines of Sacramento politics and bureaucracy. Unfortunately, we shall never know what might have been accomplished. To quote two British politicians, (Winston Churchill and Harold Macmillan) when asked about obstacles that thwarted their plans, their answer was "events". The unforeseen Covid-19 epidemic had a near catastrophic impact on every public transportation agency at a time when real progress was being made. The pandemic caused many to question whether public transportation had any future if such events were to become commonplace. Fortunately, Federal and State governments put most rail and transit services on life support that has enabled them to rebuild post Covid, but the lost years, together with the change in travel habits that Covid brought about, have left passenger rail with a steep mountain to climb to return to the relative prosperity of 2018. There's no doubt that Chad has made a major contribution to the recovery process, as well as continuing initiatives for a statewide ticketing system and fully integrated and connected intercity and regional services. We can only conjecture how much further along we would be without the Covid "event".

We thank Chad for listening to our comments, suggestions and concerns, and for speaking at Steel Wheels events. We wish him well in his new role, and good wishes to his successor at Calsta.
Chad’s shoes will be tough to fill.

