



Editors: Poor Reviews of Bush Plan

The Bush Administration's plan for passenger rail—released July 28 and introduced in bill form in the Senate on July 30 (as S.1501, see July News)—has gotten overwhelmingly poor reviews in the nation's editorial pages.

To recap, the Bush proposal would require compacts of states—very difficult to form and maintain—to cover all operating losses; separate the Northeast Corridor from Amtrak; and give private operators access rights to freight railroads that. Given their past statements, those same private-sector freight railroads would prefer that a single Amtrak have those rights.

The following is a selection of quotes

from those opinion columns.

★★★

"The Bush plan isn't the only option. Others want to put a more meaningful subsidy behind the 22,000-mile, 33-year-old system; some Republicans have proposed a six-year, \$60 billion plan [S.1505, see July News], compared to the \$1 billion a year being spent now...

"In short, it may be time to try a national system that has a real chance of working before breaking it up."

—Greenwich (Conn.) Time, August 12

★★★

"Turning the operation of Amtrak over

to the states would sound the death knell for a national rail passenger system in this country. This would be a bad idea at any time, but it comes when the states are in their worst fiscal shape in a decade. Yet, this is exactly what President Bush has proposed."

—Harrisburg Patriot-News, August 8

★★★

"The Bush administration last week advanced a shortsighted, miserly Amtrak plan that, if approved, would mark the beginning of the end for the nation's passenger rail system. Two days later, four Senate Republicans countered with a plan

(continued on page 2)

Why \$1.8 Billion for Amtrak?

The public attention given to the Bush Administration's proposal (see above) in early August detracted somewhat from a much more pressing concern—the issue of how much to fund Amtrak in 2004.

There is limited time in Congress' calendar the rest of this year to deal with longer-term issues like the Bush bill (and other reauthorization proposals), and remaining appropriations bills will take precedence. The next fiscal year begins

October 1, 2003.

The Senate will begin work on a 2004 transportation/treasury funding bill in September, and the House will take up a committee-passed bill (H.R.2989) that has only \$900 million—a shutdown level, according to Amtrak. Amtrak got \$1.043 billion in 2003, and is seeking \$1.812 billion in 2004.

It will be tempting for some in Congress to allow Amtrak to limp along at some

lower level of funding, but it would be a mistake. All other things being equal, Amtrak requires about \$1.5 billion annually in public support to keep its existing service running and functional (with no growth or shrinkage).

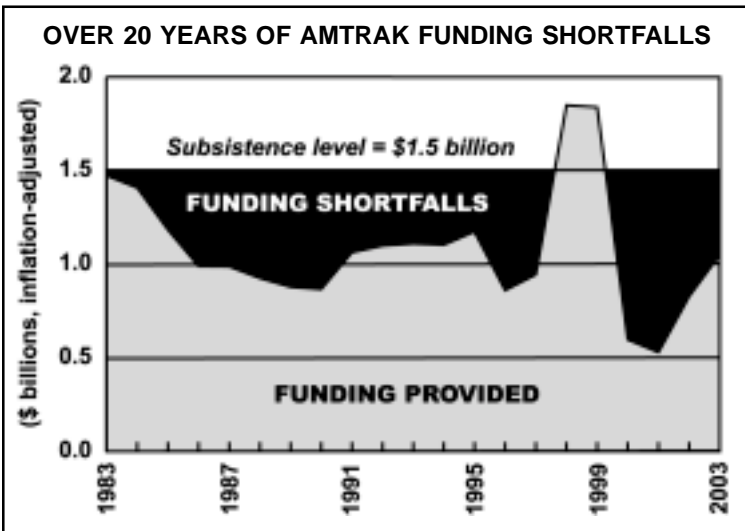
Adjusting for inflation, Amtrak, in the last

21 years, has fallen below that subsistence level in 19 years (see chart). During the same period (again, adjusting for inflation), federal highway funding more than doubled, and federal aviation funding more than tripled. Amtrak funding fell by about a third. [Amtrak travel is up in the same period.]

The result of such meager funding over the years is that Amtrak had to resort to deferred maintenance and crippling debt. That hurts Amtrak's current and future efforts to preserve nationwide service and that service's quality.

The danger in not attaining \$1.812 billion in fiscal 2004 is that, even if Amtrak continued running throughout the year, Amtrak equipment will deteriorate, more equipment will be out of service, and major Northeast Corridor speed reductions will crop up.

Provision of \$1.812 billion would allow Amtrak to stay on its program of improving maintenance and reducing debt. Even those who foresee a longer-term, radically different structure for Amtrak should concede that has a better chance of success if it builds on a sound—rather than a decrepit and debt-ridden—Amtrak. ■



Editorials

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that could resurrect this long-neglected but potentially vital component of the transportation system.”

—Modesto Bee, August 8

★★★

“The national rail network must be one system if it is to work seamlessly. This issue is not about profit and loss, it is about the national quality of life. In a country as spacious as ours, all means of staying connected must be maintained.”

—Toledo Blade, August 4

★★★

“Instead of trying to foist a short-sighted, free-market approach onto rail service, the administration and Congress should devise a viable strategy that would develop the system into a strong component of the nation’s transportation matrix.”

—Roanoke Times, August 3

★★★

“President Bush’s idea of running the nation’s passenger rail corporation like a business is on a collision course with the ideal of national intercity rail service. Congress, the switchman at the crossroads, will have to determine whether Amtrak’s network of inherently unprofitable routes finally will get the federal

support without which no rail system runs...”

—Palm Beach Post, August 4

★★★

“...As chairman of the Senate’s Surface Transportation Subcommittee, it is [Kay Bailey Hutchison’s] responsibility—her duty—to represent the interests of the entire country. She has done that consistently on this issue.

“She continues to be the visionary and the fighter who clearly understands the need to save passenger rail service. One day the country will thank her for it.”

—Fort Worth Star-Telegram, August 1

★★★

“California has already poured billions of its own money into passenger rail networks. But California, like many other states across the nation, is broke. For passenger rail to become the viable alternative to crowded freeways it has the potential to be, federal help will be needed. Hutchison’s plan would provide that necessary federal help. Bush’s plan would not.”

—Sacramento Bee, August 6

★★★

“If we want a national passenger railroad system—and we do—there must be a dedicated source of funds to subsidize

“Like those tiresome slasher movies that are recycled into endless sequels, ‘The Death of Amtrak, Part 32’ is coming soon to a political theater near you. In this latest installment, the titular victim is once again being stalked by critics—the Bush administration, this time—hellbent on ending national passenger rail service as we know it.

“Before landing the fatal blow, however, they ought to be reminded why snuffing Amtrak isn’t as easy as it looks, and why doing so would be inimical to the nation’s long-term transportation interests.

“...Dismembering Amtrak is the kind of horror show that’s not worth the price of admission.”

—Atlanta Journal-Constitution, August 3

it. Such subsidies, along the lines of the senators’ proposal or perhaps an on-going percentage of federal and state gasoline tax revenue, could at long last allow Amtrak to offer the high quality service that subsidized passenger trains offer in Europe.

“As the nation’s highways continue to become more congested, and as already-subsidized airlines continue to struggle, Amtrak provides this country a much-needed alternative means of transportation. We just have to bite the bullet, fund it properly, and let it work.”

—Helena Independent Record, August 3

★★★

“Unfortunately, all of the Northwest’s efforts to encourage train travel may come to nothing unless Congress and the president commit to supporting the national Amtrak system. President Bush wants to reduce federal support and turn the system over to multi-state compacts—a move that would doom long-distance train routes...

“Trains haven’t come close to enticing most Americans from their cars—yet. As freeways become more crowded, gas becomes more expensive, or airlines fold, that could quickly change. Prudent planners will find a way to help rail service survive until then.”

—Salem Statesman Journal, August 4

★★★



Editorials

(from page 2)

"Instead of severely cutting Amtrak's funds, federal lawmakers need to get serious about finding long-term solutions for the rail service.

"That starts with certain acceptances: Public transportation requires public funding. The government has been fixated with having Amtrak turn a profit, clouding the benefits of strong passenger rail service. Trains ease pollution problems that cars cause. They also help alleviate congestion on highways and at airports. And they provide vital transportation alternatives, such as when airplanes were grounded immediately after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks."

—*Poughkeepsie Journal*, August 1

★★★

"It seems clear to us that only the federal government can manage a rail service that travels between oceans, across deserts or mountains, and serve states with scant population as well as those with higher density."

—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, August 1

★★★

"As Sen. Olympia Snowe noted, the plan would turn the current national network into 'a patchwork system of different short-haul routes between the biggest American cities.' That's not what Congress envisioned when it created the system in 1970.

"...What is needed is a clear-eyed estimation of the level of cost for providing passenger rail service that will lure people out of their autos and away from planes."

—*Portland Press Herald*, July 31

★★★

"It looks like Montana would come out on the caboose end of the newest proposal to 'save' Amtrak..."

"But it's hard to imagine low-population, rural states—Montana, for example—coming up with the bucks necessary to pay the freight on this plan.

"...Even if we had the money to pay for the service, we'd still have to set up—and pay for—a new bureaucracy to administer it.

"And, in a tough lesson learned from utility deregulation, competition may be fine in large markets. But its desirability drops off considerably in low-volume states such as Montana."

—*Great Falls Tribune*, July 31

★★★

"Consider Amtrak's overall picture. Where it has the most trouble is where it has to run trains over some other railroad's track (in most of the country outside the Northeast, in other words). The one place where it does a passable job is where it's in control. Under the administration plan, it stands to reason that the Northeast would end up in as bad shape as the rest of the nation.

"If, moreover, having separate companies perform separate railroading functions is such a good idea, why have none of the privately owned freight railroads tried it? Norfolk Southern owns its tracks and its trains. So does CSX. So does Union Pacific. The fact is, railroads work better under one management..."

"There's no question that Amtrak is in need of repair. But hacking it to bits is not the right way to go about it."

—*Baltimore Sun*, July 31

★★★

"The idea of being able to take a swift, convenient, relatively low-cost ride to Chicago—and perhaps to other Midwestern cities, too—is certainly appealing. But don't raise your hopes.

"The reason, obviously, is money. A Midwestern network of high-speed lines

won't be built without enormous federal spending. As long the federal government continues posting record budget deficits, massive, new public works projects ought to spook taxpayers. If the government ever posts budget surpluses again, then the country can debate new "investments" once more.

"But for now, the grotesquely irresponsible money management of the federal government mocks the optimism of high-speed rail advocates."

—*Fort Wayne News-Sentinel*, July 25

★★★

"[The president's plan] could lead to route cancellations and decreased service as the new operators look for ways to cut costs. Sure it would be nice if Amtrak made a profit. But profit should not be Amtrak's overriding goal.

"For Amtrak is, above all else, a public service. Its economic benefits extend far beyond those enjoyed by passengers only. It is a vital link between communities and out-of-region business, between families and their most far-flung members. It is a convenient alternative to often-pricey air travel."

—*Syracuse Post Standard/Herald-Journal*, July 2 ■

"Without...a guaranteed subsidy, it won't be easy to find any state or private companies willing to take over Amtrak, as Bush proposes. Privatization advocates like to refer to Amtrak's Northeast Corridor service, for example, as 'profit making,' but only Enron-bred accountants would use that term.

"As well-patronized as the trains are, the corridor's trains, track, signals, wiring, bridges, and stations are all in urgent need of updating. Ticket revenues cannot begin to pay for it. A year ago Amtrak estimated its nationwide backlog of infrastructure work at \$5.8 billion.

"The Bush administration can talk optimistically about the private sector bidding for portions of the rail system, but Amtrak was created in 1971 because the private freight rail lines were giving up on passenger service. As for the cash-strapped states in the Northeast Corridor, they are having trouble maintaining subsidies for commuter rail service, much less taking on the cost

of Amtrak's intercity routes...

"The administration's views on Amtrak echo those of the Amtrak Reform Council, which advocated similar measures a year ago after it became clear that Amtrak would fail to meet a congressional mandate to become self-supporting. But that mandate was always pie in the sky. At a time when many major airlines, despite federal subsidies, have been in or just escaped bankruptcy, it is unrealistic to expect intercity train service to pay for itself and also finance the decades-long neglect of rail infrastructure.

"The Big Dig's extension of Interstate 90 to Logan Airport closed the book on Dwight Eisenhower's interstate system. From now on, roads in densely populated corridors will get only more crowded. An improved Amtrak with its own revenue stream is the only rational way to protect areas like the Northeast from traffic thrombosis."

—*Boston Globe*, July 30

Two Views on Senior Drivers

"[Surface Transportation Policy Project] President Anne Canby noted that all too often older Americans are determined to hold onto their drivers' licenses simply because they have no other choice—more reliable public transportation services and safer, more walkable neighborhoods are a key part of the solution to maintaining seniors' independence.

"It is critical—now more than ever—that we in the transportation community refocus our efforts on meeting the safe mobility and access needs of seniors," wrote Canby. 'Unfortunately, so much of the debate in the past two weeks—and the release of the report from The Road Information Program (TRIP) today is no exception—has failed to address one of the most significant problems underlying

the entire issue. Older Americans are reluctant to give up driving simply because they have no other choice."

—Surface Transportation Policy Project
Transfer, August 1

★★★

"The trail of bodies, blood and smashed property left last week by an 86-year-old driver who confused the brake pedal with the accelerator and rammed through a crowded California farmers market should remind lawmakers everywhere of a task they've neglected for too long: finding safer ways for older people to maintain their freedom and mobility...

"[After mandatory road tests], the second thing government should do: promote the building and rebuilding of communities designed to minimize the need to

drive. It's tragic that so many older Americans find themselves marooned in far-off subdivisions, miles from activity, dependent on others to drive them to shops, restaurants, doctor visits, etc. America has built a hostile environment for the elderly that's only now beginning to change...

"Expanded transit options should be a part of this picture...By investing in transit and promoting walkable communities, Minnesota could do far more to ensure that there's life beyond driving."

—Editorial, Minneapolis Star-Tribune, July 24

TRAVELERS' ADVISORY

Michigan service—Due to Norfolk Southern track work, Amtrak has reduced Detroit line service Monday-Thursday, through October 9. Train 350 runs Chicago-Battle Creek only, about 15 minutes later than scheduled, no bus replacement.

Train 353 runs Battle Creek-Chicago only, with bus from Detroit (and some other stations), about 29 minutes later than scheduled. All service is normal Friday-Sunday.

Transit—Tacoma Link, the new light rail line in downtown Tacoma,

Wash., opens August 22. An intermodal station at Tacoma Dome serving Tacoma Link, Amtrak, Sounder commuter rail, Greyhound, and airport buses should open in September.

Connecting bus—Denver RTD will improve its Union Station-Boulder bus link (which uses highway buses with luggage and bike areas), September 7. The enhancement was advocated by ColoRail and area NARP members.

Union Station, owned by RTD, is also served by Amtrak, Winter Park Ski Train, special trains, Thruway buses, light rail, and local, regional, and express buses.

RAIL-CONVENIENT LIVING



—Robert W. Glover

NARP Director Doras Briggs has relocated to a new building beside the Emeryville station, where she first inaugurated California's Volunteer Station Host program. At her new location, a rail/transit center that didn't exist until ten years ago, she has cut driving back to once a week and looks forward to eliminating it.

Briggs (above, on her balcony) was visited by NARP Executive Director Ross B. Capon on June 10. Earlier, he had served as a panelist in San Jose at the annual rail conference of American Public Transportation Association.



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